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Comic Discourse in Laurence Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

Komický diskurs v románu Laurence Sterna *Život a názory blahodárného pana, Tristrama Shandyho*

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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podpis.....

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1. Introduction

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman ranks among the most influential as well as enigmatical novels of Anglophone literature. It was published in 1767 in its complete extent and has been gaining popularity since then. It was written by a jovial parson, Laurence Sterne, about whom it is known only little. He grew up in the environment of the garrisons and this fact is often quoted as an inspiration to *Tristram Shandy* in connection to its two characters, uncle Toby and Corporal Trim¹. The same case would be that of Sterne's own career as a clergyman and the character of Parson Yorick.

Sterne had the rare luck of becoming famous and admired during his lifetime. His fame started swiftly after the publication of the first two books of *Tristram Shandy* (1759). Although he was considered too radical and difficult to read, he still managed to have a great number of admirers as well. After the publication of *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* there was no doubt about his exceptional quality and unprecedented technique². He died in 1768 as a notorious and admired writer. His popularity even brought many efforts to copy his style. Nevertheless, none of them can be measured with the original³. Although the phenomenon of epigones not reaching the quality of the model is very common, in case of Laurence Sterne, this fact must have been strengthened by his eccentric and unique technique.

Sterne's major work, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, known simply as *Tristram Shandy*, seems to be on the highest level of academic interest. The amount of metatexts written on this novel as well as the number of different approaches to it is enormous. Most researchers have focused on the structure of the novel. Among them there are such names as Wolfgang Iser or Viktor Shklovsky. There also have been many attempts to discover Sterne's possible inspiration, models and sources. Some of

¹ Charles Parish, *Tristram Shandy Notes* (Cliff's Notes, Inc., 1968) 5.

² Charles Parish, *Tristram Shandy Notes* (Cliff's Notes, Inc., 1968) 6.

³ J.C.T. Oates, *Shandysm and Sentiment* (Cambridge, 1968) 22.

them are obvious, since in *Tristram Shandy* there are passages taken almost word by word from different sources⁴. Sterne worked with these texts to create a new meaning, usually comic, by changing some details in the text or by putting the text in a new context. While sources of this nature can be traced, whether Sterne wanted to copy anything he had been familiar with in terms of this novel's structure and narrative voice will probably remain unknown. There are, however, many hints throughout the novel from which it is obvious that Sterne was aware he was creating in a new way and with a specific goal. At the very end of the book, the reader is told:

All I wish is that it may be a lesson for the world "*to let people tell their own stories their own way*". (IX, xxv, 575)⁵

His narrative technique seems unprecedented, thus it is difficult to abstract any principles of his strategies, as his writing style can only be related to itself. The condition of self-relatedness does not play a role only in the theoretical reflection of this novel; it is also its main quality. In terms of its structure Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is perhaps one of the most complex novels ever written. It is also greatly admired for its comic, although the comic, or humour⁶ one finds in the novel, seems to represent one of its most significant mysteries. There have been many attempts to decipher the way this comic functions, or in other words, to find the answer to the question of why *Tristram Shandy* is a comic novel. It appears that the main reason does not reside in any intertextual connections as suggested above, nor does it lie in the situations that are narrated or in witty twists of language. The main reason why this novel is comic requires a rather

⁴ One of them is for instance Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy**.

(*Wolfgang Iser, *Laurence Sterne: Tristram Shandy* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) 55.)

⁵ For references to the text of *Tristram Shandy*, all the following extracts are taken from the edition: Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, (Penguin Books, 2003). The extracts are marked in the '(VOLUME, chapter, page)' format.

⁶ *The comic* is used to denote the most general principle in this work; it is understood as a term that encompasses all the modes of the comic, such as humour, irony or naivety. *Humour* is discussed in the chapter on Jean Paul and it bears certain aspects of its elder meaning deriving from the humoral juices.

complex analysis; its main discourse⁷ should not be *what* in this novel has the comic effect, but *how* this novel is construed so that the comic effect arrives.

This main focus of this thesis is the comic originating from the distortion of the usual narrative strategies. Sterne's original treatment of the sujet⁸ seems to be productive of the comic effect in a rather unusual manner. In this novel, there are almost no common comic or humoristic techniques, such as the situational comic, language comic, jokes or humorous anecdotes either told by the characters or directly narrated to the reader in a usual manner.

However, this fact does not mean that these schemes or other more general principles of the comic are not present in *Tristram Shandy*; they are performed by the narration itself. What is more, Sterne's narrative techniques appear to fulfil many of the comic principles on different layers, within different discursive fields of the text. This thesis explores the ways in which the narrative idiosyncrasies of this novel bring about the comic effect, the nature of which is derived from the theories of the comic by Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud.

The first part of the analysis draws mainly from Wolfgang Iser's classification of Sterne's narrative techniques and from the underlying structure of play in the novel.⁹ Second, it attempts to suggest a possible approach to the narrative comic in *Tristram Shandy*, based mainly on the nature of the narrative voice and the dynamic character of the so-called *narrative gap*¹⁰. Third, it reflects the comic effects brought about by the

⁷ This term is used in the sense that derives from the concept of Michel Foucault, not as a pure synonym to discussion - unless stated otherwise.

⁸ The words *sujet* and *narrative* are used synonymously in this work.

⁹ Iser also presents his own attitude towards humour in *Tristram Shandy*. Due to the fact that his opinions are derived from Jean Paul's *School for Aesthetics*, discussion of this part of Iser's study is included in the chapter on Jean Paul.

¹⁰ This term is used in this work to denote the space on the borders between the text and the space within (the fictional world or the world of the characters) and also the border between the text and the space without (the world of the reader and the world of the character). The narrative gap is a space in which most of the logic inadequacies of narration take place; for instance the illogical though conventionally accepted treatment of time relations. This concept is discussed throughout chapter 2.

unconventional development of the narrative, or *sujet*, as described by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky in his *Theory of Prose*.

The second part of the analysis discusses some other aspects found in the novel that are significant and unique in the field of the comic. These are the role of associations and John Locke in the text and the influence the nature of humour which emanated from this novel had on the thoughts of Jean Paul.

It is important to note that comic effects cannot be described normatively. That means, everywhere the comic effect is ascribed to the discussed passages of *Tristram Shandy*, it is more in fact a suggestion or an assumption of its occurrence. The reasons for its possible occurrence are the core matter of this thesis. Reception of the comic discourse of literature has not been explored on a neurological basis yet¹¹, thus, no indisputable general norms for the origin and reception of the comic have been found till the present day.

1. 2. General Theoretical background: Bergson and Freud

The field of theoretical reflection on the comic seems to be rather incoherent. There are many researchers who engage in the comic discourse; however, for all of them this area seems to be on the margin of their interest. There is no generally accepted and widely referred to approach to the comic which would serve as a platform for further discussion. Bergson and Freud come from different fields of discourse and as a result of that, they use different systems of terminology and start from different general premises of their theses.

Despite this fact, Bergson's and Freud's attitudes to the comic appear to resemble each other in many regards. They both work with the concept of the comic incongruence.

¹¹ Such research is not known to the author.

Sigmund Freud in his study *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*¹² explores it in principle and attempts for a general definition. Bergson's *Essay on the Nature of the Comic* known as *Laughter*¹³ concentrates on the moment of the comic incongruence as well, aiming at its description and further categorisation. Unlike Freud, Bergson does not aim towards formulating a general definition of what is comic, or rather in his case, *the laughable*.

Both these theories appear more than relevant for the analysis of the comic in *Tristram Shandy*, since their notions of the comic incongruence is applicable to the structure of this novel in a very productive way, as it will be shown in the main analysis (chapter 2.).

1. 2. 1. Henri Bergson's *Laughter*

Bergson lists three main symptoms of the laughable¹⁴. First, it does not exist outside the sphere of human intellect; a landscape or an animal cannot be funny by itself, they both need a comparison to the human body or actions to gain the quality of the laughable. Second, it is a strictly intellectual process. Any emotional bond to the comic subject has to be suppressed momentarily; he clearly states that 'the comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple.'¹⁵ Finally, Bergson notices the collective nature of the comic, stating that the intelligence witnessing the comic has to be connected to other intelligence(s) so that the effect of the comic arrives¹⁶. Bergson's main point about the collective element in laughter is the fact that the comic takes place in a community that aims its attention

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Vtip a jeho vztah k nevědomí* (Psychoanalytické nakladatelství, 2005).

¹³ Henri Bergson, *Smích* (Naše vojsko, 1994).

¹⁴ Bergson, 16 – 18.

¹⁵ Bergson 17.

¹⁶ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's approach to the collective nature of the comic, or rather laughter, will be discussed later, in the chapter concerning the comic effects of human body in *Tristram Shandy*.

towards an individual inside this community¹⁷, this notion is evident also in his description of the comic of the professions. Bergson does not seem to work with the more or less homogeneous concept of a society or culture, more likely his idea of the entity opposite to the comic subject is several individuals, that means, discrete units interconnected by whatever they might have in common.

Another important symptom, probably the most cited of Bergson's thoughts on the comic is the notion of rigidity. It is important to note that *Laughter* is not a concise or structured work on the theme of the comic, it is a philosophical essay which sometimes leaves too much space for the interpreter to impose his/her platform of thinking upon it. Although Bergson does not list rigidity among the symptoms clearly, it seems to fit in this group without any excessive friction. He understands the importance of laughter as a means of revealing hypocrisy of living things when they act as lifeless, rigid and thus undesirable for society. It functions the other way around as well - if the inanimate or mechanical things and systems act as if they were alive. Laughter seems to serve as a guardian preventing these from entering the society of the living. Rigidity, mechanic nature or lack of vivid flexibility in general can also be ascribed to nonmaterial entities such as intellect or character¹⁸.

Bergson's theories of the comic in situations and in words seem to be only further specifications of his central rigidity thesis. For situations, he lists three basic principles that bring about the comic. First, it is the so called *Jack-in-the box* principle. It stands for a situation where the character repeats his/her action with the same or even gradated vigour no matter his/her being pushed back by obstacles or absence of effect. The source of the comic is the stubborn mechanic repetition without flexible adaptation to the fact of missing effect.

¹⁷ Bergson 18.

¹⁸ Bergson 21.

The *Dancing-Jack*¹⁹ principle can be explained briefly as a character acting on the basis of wrong information given to him/her on purpose by another character (who resembles a puppeteer). This is probably the most questionable of the three principles, because the same scheme is often used in tragedies. Othello, Oidipus or Electra (mainly in the scene where she mourns holding the urn with what she believes to be her brother who however stands beside her alive) acted as a result of being manipulated by wrong information before they reached the point of *anagnorisis*, be it caused by unavoidable Fate or by an actual character of a manipulator. All of them are major tragic figures. They act in contrast to the audience's expectation, since they do not know the facts that the audience do. The reason why this incongruence does not evoke the comic effect must rest in the presence of sympathy for them. In tragedies the audience must be made to feel fear and pity for the characters, whereas laughter, or the comic feeling, is most often explained as a purely rational reaction to the impulse.

The assertion that this scheme functions in the comic mode as well could be supported by Freud's condition for the occurrence of the comic, mainly the condition of expectation of the comic; the fact that the *Dancing-Jack* principle scene takes place in a comedy or comic/humorous/absurd work of literature makes us perceive it in the comic/humorous/absurd mode. On the other hand, there seems to be certain linguistic strategies applied to enhance the comic effect. For instance estranging the concrete character and making him/her general and type- or class-like by using common nouns instead of proper names. Othello would never be called *Le Jaloux*²⁰, *A Jealous Man*, as this could only be a title for a comedy. The concretisation which occurs as a result of stressing the proper name in a title or during the work may lead to deeper sympathy for the character and, on the other hand, stressing the type of the character may bring a more detached perspective, which is desirable for evoking the comic effect.

¹⁹ Bergson 43.

²⁰ Bergson 20.

The last of the three principles is called the *Snow-ball*²¹. When something goes wrong, there is a causal chain of events following and the misunderstanding or misfortunes grow bigger and bigger like a snow-ball that grows as the snow, probably meaning all the events that could have gone right, sticks to it. This principle is often used in *Tristram Shandy*, although with some differences; it does not refer to a situation but rather to a narrative pattern and the snow ball does not grow naturally and continuously; instead, it grows in leaps and sometimes rolls backwards.

All these principles of repetition or mechanical development are in accordance with Bergson's central thesis of the mechanic-organic (rigid-vivid) comic deceit. The same goes for the character²² and intellect that express themselves mechanically. The inability to adapt to the ever-changing conditions brings about the effect of the comic. In this respect, Bergson's attitude is very similar to Sigmund Freud's, both deriving from the comic *macrotheory* of superiority²³.

The main analysis (chapter 2) of this work shows that Tristram's narration fulfils all three of Bergson's schemes of situational comic not in the fictional events of the plot, but through narrative patterns. The same holds for Bergson's main thesis on the comic deceit that is found in the rigid posture of living things and vivid posture of mechanical entities. The culprit of the deceit is, again, is the process of narration.

²¹ Bergson 44.

²² (as the psychological notion, an opposition to temperament, not a *figure* as in common literary taxonomy)

²³ Vladimír Borecký, a Czech researcher of the comic, describes three main macrotheories of the comic, one of them being the macrotheory of superiority, interpreting the comic as derision, the other two being the macrotheory of relaxation in which the comic feeling is interpreted as relaxation of tension and of incongruence which seems to be the starting point for many comic principles.* (*Vladimír Borecký, *Teorie Komiky* (Hynek 2000) 45.)

1. 2. 2. Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*

Sigmund Freud's thoughts on the comic focus mainly on the category of *joke*; however, some of his most important conclusions seem to be applicable to the comic in general. The central term in Freud's approach to the comic is *pleasure*. The recipient gains pleasure from the laughable due to the spared release of energy. He defines three types of this pleasure²⁴: First, it is the pleasure of the joke which Freud describes as originating from the spare of repressive energy. In other words, the joke makes us able to express or rather experience the forbidden, be it for moral, social or personal reasons. Joke provides us with a platform where we can experience what in other cases is repressed by our superego. Rejecting the mechanism of repression and the energy we spare thereby is what brings about pleasure. Such principle seems to draw from the general principle of relaxation of tension through experiencing the comic²⁵.

Second, Freud describes energy we spare in the case of the *humorous* outcome of a situation. In his interpretation, the term humour depicts the type of the comic which serves us as a means to spare ourselves the energy of a negative feeling. Instead of experiencing the feeling of sympathy for the subject, it causes more pleasure to choose experiencing the comic that means humour.

Last but not least, it is the pleasure caused by the energy that one spares instead of wasting it in an ineffectual action as the comic subject; this refers to the category of the comic as Freud understands this notion. He explains this principle with the example of the bodily comic. He states that for instance a big nose, hump or any other overgrown part of the body^{26, 27} brings about the comic reception, since the recipient views these objects as if they were in motion, or rather as if they were performed by the body on purpose, thus with an excessive use of energy.

²⁴ Freud 218.

²⁵ Borecký 46.

²⁶ Freud 182.

²⁷ Bakhtin's approach to the comic effects of human body is discussed in chapter 2.3.2.

The same would be the case of the banana peel comic cliché. In its case, the comic subject did not realise the change of his/her/its circumstances (the presence of the banana peel in his way) and did not replace physical work by intellectual work, which would inevitably mean avoiding the peel, and thus the subject wasted physical energy purposelessly. The banana peel situation bears many traces of the superiority aspects in the comic. The recipient compares the way he/she would have acted in this situation him/herself. This comparison is the source of pleasure. It is a pleasure of realization that the recipient spared the energy the subject wasted and it is reached only by the comparison of the real situation and the recipient's projection of his own imagined actions.²⁸

The third case, the pure comic, also involves the aspect of the so-called comic incongruence. Freud, unlike Bergson, attempts to provide its general definition. He states that the comic feeling is caused by the fact that our mind is forced to oscillate between two incongruent notions²⁹, thus, out of rational confusion and to relax the pressure the mind experiences at that moment, the situation is resolved in the comic feeling, or even laughter. Laughter, or the comic feeling is a low-mode reaction to the problem, a high-mode reaction would be to view it as a philosophical problem. The absurd seems to be somewhere within this scale³⁰.

Except for these three reasons for considering a situation comic, humorous or as a joke, Freud also lists several conditions³¹ for the occurrence of the comic, such as expectation of the comic, and conditions that prevent it³². Together with Bergson, Freud

²⁸ Freud further develops this principle by introducing the childhood element. He states that if the comic subject is a child, he/she seems comic to the recipient, not because he/she would enjoy the pleasure of him/her being superior to the child, but because the comparison takes place between the real situation and the recipient's image of himself as a child. The pleasure then seems to derive from the joy that he/she developed and is not in such undesirable condition as the child any more.

²⁹ Freud 180.

³⁰ Borecký 28.

³¹ Freud 204-208.

³² First, when the recipient is too much concentrated on another aspect of the subject or situation, second, when the interest of the recipient is directed exactly towards the incongruence between two elements from which the comic may originate and third, if the recipient sympathises with the comic subject.

is certain that the comic cannot occur at the expense of an emotion. A mother would not laugh at her own child as it fell down. The feeling (be it pity, regret, love, etc.) always holds precedence in one's experience. Besides this precedence, he states that there is a category of unconditioned comic. It is a concept of a very strong comic impulse that does not need any other conditions fulfilled besides its mere existence and always, under any circumstances, brings the comic effect, be it extremely rude or unsuitable.

Freud's theories of the comic show applicable to *Tristram Shandy* in many respects. Some of Freud's attitudes towards the reasons for the comic potential of the human body seem to explain the comic effect of human bodies in *Tristram Shandy*, for instance in the descriptions of body postures. Also Freud's concept of the comic as a conflict that causes the oscillation of mind refers to this novel at several points in the following analysis; the comic oscillation occurs usually in the distortions of the conventional reader-narrator relation and in the unusual development of the narrative; in the way how new information is being interwoven into the narrative.

The following analysis shows how Freud's and Bergson's notions of the comic are present in the narrative structure and style of *Tristram Shandy*. The narrative structure is communicated to the reader through the character of the narrator. The narrative situation of *Tristram Shandy* is characterised by its complexity which is reached by a constant tendency to switch between the inner and the outer perspectives. The narrator represents also one of the characters, thus he is a part of the fictional world; however, for instance thank to the fact that he frequently addresses himself to the reader, he trespasses the border of the fictional world. The following chapter discusses the nature of the narrative voice of *Tristram Shandy*.

2. The Comic Structure of *Tristram Shandy*

2.1. Wolfgang Iser's notion the Narrative of *Tristram Shandy*

The comic originating from the nature of the narrative voice in this novel seems to be of the most innovative, unique and at the same time elusive quality. The structure of this novel is what has lured most of its researchers since its publication. There are many almost cliché-like descriptions of *Tristram Shandy*, such as that it is a kind of narrative in which the narration itself is one of the characters, or that the hero is constantly backend by the mass of material that hurtles in the text³³. Most such quotes appear to be true, or at least there remains no means of proving them wrong. Perhaps the most obvious clue for how to approach this novel is through its title.

In the eighteenth century, most novels were called *histories*, which signifies the way they had been construed as well as their purpose. Many of them were modelled upon John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, thus, the histories were expected to set an example of a life. The main reason for the evolution of such an approach was most probably the Puritan mind-set of the society. *Robinson Crusoe* is a great representative of this exemplifying notion. It is a story of a man who was destined to undergo all his misfortunes because he had to be learned to reflect and obey Providence. The same lesson is expected from the reader. It is narrated by the main hero himself, however, in a detached perspective, after he had gone through and survived all his misfortunes and changed into a different person.

A similar summary could be made with Feilding's *Tom Jones*. It is a journey towards the cultivation of the character by gaining prudence and greater control of one's feelings. The narrator of *Tom Jones* claims himself to be a part of the world of the characters. However, the manner in which he narrates the story is close to omniscience,

³³ Viktor Šklovskij, *Teorie prózy* (Akropolis, 2003) 173.

thus the narrator cannot be considered a part of the fictional world. Sterne must have been aware of this paradox; he probably wanted to point at its existence.

The nature of the narrative voice in *Tristram Shandy* has been puzzling literary theoreticians ever since. In authorial novels the narrator claims himself to be a part of the fictional world. Usually, he narrates a story he/she witnessed or was told some time ago or a story in which the narrator him/herself took part. He/she is shaped as one of the characters, that means, with opinions about the story or other characters and the reader may even be made aware of him/her as of a human being of certain physical qualities. Although he/she might adopt a detached perspective, or even address the reader sometimes, the narrator views him/her as belonging to the fictional world. Sterne most probably noticed that this technique is not applied consistently and that the narrators often change their perspectives to omniscience. Although the narrator is introduced as an individual, he/she does not have the quality of subjectivity and the condition of subjective limitation³⁴. Sterne must have been aware that such kind of a narrator could not have witnessed everything he/she narrates and that he/she might or even should not understand the actions of other characters not knowing their motivation. Sterne probably introduced a narrator as a subjectivity³⁵, with its limitations and eccentricities.

The narrative situation of *Tristram Shandy* might be considered generally shaped as that of an autobiography. In autobiographies the narrator claims himself to be the author, thus, the narrator is not a part of the fictional world. Despite the fact that he narrates events in which he himself participated, he shares the world with the readers.

Tristram seems to be somewhere in the middle, between the narrative situation of an autobiography and that of an authorial novel. He is the sovereign of the story and narrates from his perspective; however, the reader knows that the name of the author is

³⁴ The limitation means the features of an individual that limit and determine his/her knowledge and mental processes. More on the narrator's subjectivity and the consecutive limitation in chapter 3.2.

³⁵ Iser 56.

not Tristram Shandy. The same inadequacy holds for the notion of the authorial narrator, because Tristram is in no way consistent in his position within the fictional world. The Tristram that represents one of the characters is not the Tristram that narrates the story.

Tristram the narrator knows much more (events he did not witness, thoughts and histories of other characters) than he would have known as a narrating character fully attached to the fictional world. What is more, he does not make any effort to authenticate the way he acquired the knowledge, for instance by an assertion of authenticity, such as 'I was once told that...'. Tristram's twofold nature could be interpreted as Sterne's conscious parodying of the common, however, illogical narrative conventions. That is, even a narrator that claim him/herself to be one of the characters is not able to tell the story from this perspective the whole time consistently. Instead, they switch to omniscience whenever the reader *needs* to be told more than what they would have known had they stayed within the chosen narrative situation.

One of the effects of this schizophrenia of Tristram is an occurrence of the narrative gap³⁶. The narrative conventions probably evolved as strategies that showed the most efficient in pretending that this gap does not exist, so that the readers could *experience* the fictional reality not being aware of its artificiality. Usually, novels are construed with the intention to deny the existence of this gap or to make it as small as possible so that the represented reality seems not represented but in fact existing. That would be the case of Samuel Richardson who is considered to be a founder or an anticipator of psychological fiction. He attempted to deny the narrative gap by letting the readers into his characters' minds through their personal correspondence that was written shortly after or even during the events they were experiencing. The fact that it is not plausible that the characters would manage to write letters about everything that happens to them (sometimes even in the time that it happens) was parodied in Fielding's *Shamela*. It could be called a parody of an over-extensive effort to eliminate the gap.

³⁶ See note no.10.

Tristram the narrator knows about this gap and his intention is not to pretend that it does not exist, for instance by the technique of however probable or improbable authentication as illustrated above. On the contrary, he stresses the existence of this gap and works with it throughout the novel. The narrative gap, its function and dynamism is thus a major source of the comic in this novel (see chapter 2.2.)

Besides the comparison to usual narrative situations of Sterne's epoch, there is another significant comparison to be mentioned. It concerns again the full title of *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne did not use the label *history*; instead, he named his novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Wolfgang Iser derives the transfer of *Tristram Shandy* from the discursive conventions of the day from the change of *history* to *life* in its title. Histories 'focus on the empirical world in order to validate the norms represented by the hero. If history is meant to ratify these values, it is still subservient to an overriding purpose, which, in turn, finds its endorsement only through the successful mastery of life's conflicts.'³⁷ Iser further continues that Tristram Shandy's life has no such overwhelming goal. Instead of giving all the single events their individual or causal relation to the ultimate purpose, the narrator serves us with glimpses of his memories, associating them to anything that comes across his mind at the moment³⁸.

It is the mode of narration which has the narrator find himself 'in the midst of things'.³⁹ It seems also that this is Tristram's goal, since his narration communicates to us a state of being in the midst of things which in its nature cannot end by any all-embracing meaning - the only end imaginable is death⁴⁰. In *Tristram Shandy*, we are in the middle from the beginning to the end. Sterne enhanced this ethos by frequent use of interruptions which enable him to unfold the life as a happening, but at the same time it

³⁷ Iser 3.

³⁸ This mechanism is derived from Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* (see chapter 3.1.)

³⁹ Iser 57.

⁴⁰ Iser 57.

'prevents him from translating this happening into a meaning, for if he did so, life would then stand for something which it is not.'⁴¹

The narrative voice of *Tristram Shandy* is rather unusual. It is in no way a classical omniscient narrator; it would contradict the supposed aim of the book – to depict a subjective self (or to show it as impossible to depict). Omniscience is objective; it has no personal limitations of knowledge or inclination to certain paths of one's thoughts.

As it was already stated, Tristram is neither a classical authorial narrator. He is a part of the fictional space, however, not the Tristram that narrates the story. Tristram the narrator does not bother to acknowledge anything of what he says. He does not mention how he found out about the situations he did not witness directly. Although *Tristram Shandy* is narrated in the so-called ich-form, or the first person narrative, the narrator does not attempt to eliminate the gap between him and the world⁴². He does not narrate from the inner perspective, identifying himself with the experiencing character (Tristram) fully. Tristram does not experience differently in his childhood and in his adulthood, which would help create the inner attached perspective; rather, the perspective concerning the events of his own life is close to omniscience, or to the authorial mode of a narrator who had gone through the story and now sees it in a detached reflexive perspective.

The narrative mode of *Tristram Shandy* is indeed unique and the relation of the narrator to the fictional world, to the reader or to himself as one of the characters is a platform of major importance for developing the structural comic. The complexity of the narrator offers a space within which the most often static narrative gap that is usually a given throughout novels changes and moves in different schemes, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

⁴¹ Iser 69.

⁴² Iser 58.

Iser defined four ways of text disruption in *Tristram Shandy*. The first of them is the first person narrator. Besides what was stated above, it is important to note that the first person narrator is of great significance for the associative principle since it represents the aspect of personal psychology, memory and intellect. The role and functions of associations in this novel are discussed in chapter 3.1. The first person narrator makes it possible to develop the following narrative strategies.

The next narrative strategy utilized by Tristram the narrator, mentioned by Iser is interruption. It seems to make the narration more similar to conversation. The ethos of speaking is present very often, for instance, in occasional addressing of the reader or due to the typographical symbols that are used to enhance this ethos⁴³. The nature of speech also corresponds to the concept of seemingly coincident associations which appear to be applied in this novel instead of a classical causal and chronological plot-line. The dialogue in which the reader is expected to participate takes place also in equivocations⁴⁴. Iser regards all the narrative strategies and graphic eccentricities, including the blackened page, empty chapters or the confused order of chapters, as a means of activating the reader and making him a part of the dialogue that the narration offers.

Whereas interruption indicates the extent to which Sterne's narrator reflects on the narrative technique, the strategy of digression, which structures the whole novel, is meant to expose the narrative fabric. Viktor Shklovsky's explanation of the development of the sujet seems to be further categorisation of the digressive principle. Thanks to its major comic potential, there is a respective chapter (2.3.) included in this work. The digressive principle – or the aesthetics of the crooked line – was, according to Iser, used in *Tristram Shandy* to free the narrative from its subservience to its central plot-line and ultimate meaning⁴⁵. The comic potential of equivocation, as the last narrative strategy listed by Iser, also asks for a discussion in some detail; its comic is explained in chapter

⁴³ Iser 62.

⁴⁴ The same holds for equivocations. (See chapter 3)

⁴⁵ Iser 73.

2.2.1. All of these deviations from the narrative conventions of eighteenth century prose appear to serve as a means of setting free the story that was tied down as if in a straitjacket. This liberation brought a brand new space for new types of discourses to occur, including those of the comic nature.

The continual usage of these narrative deviations (which in *Tristram Shandy* rather stand for the norm than for deviations) forms a specific type of a structured and lawful chaos. This seems to be one of the points of departure for the structural comic of *Tristram Shandy*. The whole novel is created on the platform of the play, both in its anthropological and its theatrical meaning. The ludistic notion of the world, life or the text is one of the basic aspects of the comic in this novel.

The play⁴⁶ Tristram poses upon the reader takes place on many levels of the text. There are plays, or hobby-horses that are described in the text, be it uncle Toby's obsession with reconstructing of the battle-field where he was wounded, or Walter's never-ending fight with the world of coincidence by means of outwitting the natural laws by inventing a seemingly satisfactory explanation or theories. These games would probably fit more in the discussion of the comic in the characters. Play also occurs in *Tristram Shandy* in its theatrical meaning, it is discussed in chapter 2.2.2. The general tendency or motion of the text seems to be the simplest game ever invented; it is the movement of to and fro, forwards and backwards⁴⁷ known simply as *teasing*.

The ethos of both unacknowledged and acknowledged teasing is the ingredient that makes this novel as unique and ahead of its epoch as it undoubtedly is. It has been often discussed whether *Tristram Shandy* is or is not a postmodern work of literature. The structural disruptions do not suffice for such an assertion since, although postmodernism is defined by the multiple-layered nature of the text, the multiplicity is usually connected to intercultural communication. This feature does not seem to be present in *Tristram*

⁴⁶ Iser 94 – 106.

⁴⁷ Iser 93.

Shandy; however, what this novel and the postmodern art appear to have in common is precisely the ethos of teasing.

2. 2. A Suggestion of an Approach to Structural Comic in *Tristram Shandy*

2. 2. 1. The Four Motions and the Ethos of Teasing

The postmodern period, in literature, film or what is nowadays called conceptual art seems to have brought a change in the mode of reception of art. The postmodern taste, however vague this generalisation might be, appears to prefer the kind of art that does not bear its communicative⁴⁸ function as its main aim. The general philosophical premise of postmodernism is that the world is too fragmentary to even try to head to a single truth or message, thus the readers or viewers of the postmodern period do not seem to seek general truths in art. What they are looking for appears to be confusion and indeed teasing; they want to be played with and perhaps this feeling of being confused, teased and lost in a mechanism they do not rule or understand is what gives them the transcendental experience of absolution and ultimate understanding. The ethos of teasing is present in *Tristram Shandy* by great measure. It seems to be the reason why this novel is often labelled as anticipating postmodernism.

The postmodern nature of this novel is derived from the narrative structure whose most important feature in this respect is not mere chaos but precisely the ethos of teasing. Iser defines this dynamicity of to and fro as the simplest game principle. However, in *Tristram Shandy* there appear to be at least four different motions or directions in the text. The first two are derivable from Iser's interpretation. Whereas Iser places the source of the movement somewhere behind the text (the to and fro movement presupposes someone or something pulling the string outside the space

⁴⁸ Communication is understood in the broadest sense possible, meaning besides sharing information also communication of purely aesthetic nature.

where the movement takes place), it is more likely that the source of the movement is located within the text.

Tristram as the narrator, the sovereign of his world as well as the source of this movement seems to be located in the centre of these movements, in the still and only solid spot. From this spot the movement of this narration is emanating in four different directions. The target of the first two, forward and back, remains in the text. The first example illustrates the forward direction. It is a classical anticipation.

'How this event came about /*speaking about his squeezed nose*/,--- and what a train of vexatious disappointments, in one stage or other of my life, have pursued me from the mere loss, or rather compression of this one single member,--shall be laid before the reader in due time.' (I, xv, 39)

The anticipatory movement in the text is a common narrative technique. However, unlike more conventional novels, the promised information does not come straight ahead and may also never come at all in *Tristram Shandy*. The disappointment or frustration that might be evoked by this strategy is probably not significant, however, this technique still supports the ethos of teasing. To use Shklovsky's taxonomy, this technique does not appear to be the major narrative innovation. It is also worth noting that in this example there is a promise of the Bergsonian snow-bal principle comic.

The opposite direction seems to be rather more innovative. It is applied not only in terms of the content, meaning the actual fictional events; it even refers to the act of narration and reading itself.

'---How could you, Madam, be so inattentive in reading the last chapter? I told you in it, That my mother was not a papist.----Papist! You

told me no such thing, Sir. Madam, I beg leave to repeat it over again, ...'
(I, xx, 51)

This situation involves the third movement as well. Its target is located outside of the text; it is the reader him/herself. The tradition of addressing the reader directly is very common in literature, it could be found in Fielding's *Tom Jones* or in Diderot's *Jacques, the Fatalist*, only to quote the notorious examples. However, the manner in which it is used in *Tristram Shandy* is rather more complex. There are also the reader's answers involved in the text, which appears to be relatively unique and also to be an evidence of Sterne's unusual creative powers.

Tristram does not address the reader only to inform him/her that what he is reading is a fiction or was an event that the narrator witnessed, nor does he use it only to refer to the process of narration. In *Tristram Shandy*, the narrator uses this technique to refer to discourses outside the usual narration of a story. What is more, he does it in an intrusive or even obtrusive manner. The passage quoted above continues:

'...That I told you as plain, at least, as words, by direct interference, could tell you such a thing.---Then, Sir, I must have miss'd a page.—No, Madam,---- you have not miss'd a word. ---- Then I was asleep, Sir. ---- My pride, Madam, cannot allow you that refuge.---- Then, I declare, I know nothing at all about the matter.----That, Madam, is the very fault I lay to your charge; and as a punishment for it, I do insist upon it, that you immediately turn back, that is, as soon as you get to the next full stop, and read the whole chapter over again.' (I, xx, 51-52)

The frustration that the reader experiences is caused not only by retardation of the story, it is also caused by introducing completely different techniques and seemingly useless information into the text in contrast with what the reader is used to. In this case it serves as a reproach to the reader's lack of attention; similarly the order to re-read the previous chapter is indeed something that the reader does not expect, that disturbs him/her and decelerates the act of casual reading and sense construction of the text.

This paragraph seems to summarize many of Sterne's reflexive techniques. Besides the feature of narration as a process in time, which is a major concern for Sterne and will be discussed later, it reflects the previous subject matter, the reading process and its time demands, the existence of the reader herself (in this case it is indeed a female reader) and even writing as a graphic device of communication. He orientates the reader according to the closest full stop, which is something remarkably complex. The narrator points at himself as a source of the narration as well as of the words and punctuation. He stages a dialogue with a reader with which the actual reader is to identify him/herself. Thanks to this ironic exchange, the reader acquires a few instructions on how to approach this text. He/she – the actual reader – is consoled, though ironically, that it is normal if he/she misses any information and that the novel he/she is reading might be causing the need to sleep. This seems to imply the overwhelming attitude of the text to be posturing as wanting to be taken seriously with constant undermining and ironising it at the same time.

The order or rather instruction included in this paragraph seems to be more complex than just to re-read the previous chapter and learn the information that the lady-reader lacks. By staging the dialogue between the narrator and the reader in an ironic manner, the narrator seems to be stressing the fact that the factual information is not the main matter of his chapters. As it was already stated, Sterne's decision to name his novel *Life and Opinions* points to the intention not to narrate a usual story in a

conventional manner. Tristram even expresses his thoughts on his work on many places in the text, at random:

A) 'All I content for is the utter impossibility of some volumes, that you, or the most penetrating spirit upon earth, should know how this matter really stands.' (I, xviii, 46)

In the following extract, the narrator further discusses why he ordered the lady-reader to re-read the previous chapter:

A a) ' 'Tis to rebuke a vicious taste which has crept into thousands beside herself, ---of reading straight forwards, more in quest of adventures, than of deep erudition and knowledge (...). The mind should be accustomed to make wise reflections and draw curious conclusions as it goes along (...)' (I, xx, 52)

B) '...the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contradictory motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too, - and at the same time.' (I, xxii, 63 - 64)

C) 'Digressions, incontestably, are the sun-shine, ----they are the life, the soul of reading,---- take them out of this book for instance,--- you might take the book along with them.' (I, xxii, 64)

D) 'All the dexterity and the good cookery and management of them, so as to be not only for the advantage of the reader, but also of the author, whose distress, in this matter, is truly pitiable:...' (I, xxii, 64)

E) ----This is a vile work. For which reason, from the beginning of this, you see, I have construed the main work and the adventitious parts of it with such intersections, and have so complicated the digressive and progressive movements, one wheel within another, that the whole machine, in general, has been kept a-going; ...' (I, xxii, 64)

The extracts A) and Aa) together with the reproach quoted above seem to suggest the other and more probable interpretation that this specific discourse of the novel is a part of Sterne's general ironic plan. In the dedication, it is clearly stated that 'every time a man smiles,—but much more so, when he laughs, [...] it adds something to his Fragment of Life.'⁴⁹ If we accept this attitude as a perspective in which we are supposed to read the novel — and not as another ironic frame — there can be no doubt that nothing seemingly serious or what is supposed to be meant seriously in a book written by an honourable clergyman should be interpreted as such in Sterne's case. Sterne must have used the nonconventional title in order to stress the uniqueness of his approach and to make his reader open to and suspicious of a most probably not yet experienced narrative strategy.

The extracts above represent the fourth movement, the direction towards or rather into the narrator. His observation about his work's simultaneous digressivity and progressivity is more than fitting, though the nature of the resultant vector is not just a diagonal or traverse originating from the two notions in the right angle. The narrator is

⁴⁹ Sterne 3.

aware of this fact by showing the graphic representation of his narrative; it is a remarkably crooked line, each curl referring to a digression of respective size⁵⁰.

The comic incongruence seems to reside in the fact that the irony of scolding the readership for their lack of attention is used together with admitting a contradiction to it, that is, that this 'story' was made difficult and ambiguous consciously; to undermine any effort to search for sense in this contradiction, it is often mentioned that all is done for the reader's good humour.

There is one more aspect of the narrator's direct performance that stands out of the stream of narration, namely, the graphic curiosities. Except for the illustrative crooked lines, hyphens and special pages such as the black one to indicate sadness about Yorick's death, there are the asterisks. The asterisks stand for equivocations and their comic effect is indisputable. Of course, it could be related to the ethos of play or teasing; however, in this respect, Freud's theory of the spared repressive energy of jokes seems to be applicable. The following extract is uncle Toby's contribution to the discussion between himself and Walter on the topic of Mrs. Shandy's preference of the old midwife instead of the man-midwife, Dr. Slop:

'----My sister, I dare say, added he, does not care to let a man come so near her ****. (II, xi, 89)

The fact that there has been used a certain number of asterisks encourages the reader to think about the actual word missing. Although it seems that this technique of equivocation goes against Freud's theory of rejected repression and consequent pleasure of breaking a taboo, in fact it fulfils its merit in a manner more elaborate than if the word was pronounced openly. The asterisks only point at the taboo nature of the missing word and the act of filling the word is up to the reader. This brings the Freudian pleasure of

⁵⁰ Sterne (VI, xl, 426).

joke directly to the reader without the mediation by the narrator. In other words, the fact that the narrator left the breaking of the social taboo up to the reader brings more pleasure to the reader. Also, the factor of one's own associations may play a certain role. By letting the reader fill in his/her own associations the text leaves a generous space for the reader to occupy it. Of course, the missing word may also bring about the ethos of mystery and incompleteness, the reader may even let him/herself mislead by the fact that the author of this novel was a clergyman and might possibly not have meant anything socially unacceptable. However, the issue is resolved though, of course, only in a hint:

'I will not say whether my uncle Toby had completed the sentence or not;--as, I think, he could have added no ONE WORD which would have improved it.' (II, vim 89)

The fact that uncle Toby could have used no one word to improve the sentence (probably due to his nature) is rather self-explanatory. The use of capital letters seem to enhance the effect of the forbidden word, also the use of the phrase 'ONE WORD' seems to imply that there is *the* one word of which everybody knows it is not decent to talk about. All of these graphic highlights including the equivocation asterisks function as an encouragement for the reader to break the taboo, make the joke him/herself and experience the pleasure directly.

A similar case is that of aposiopesis. Sterne sometimes uses long hyphenation instead of asterisks, thus it is confusing whether the graphic symbol stand for equivocation or aposiopesis. It also appears that the more the narrator gains experience towards the book, the graphic oddities, including a sign of a pointing finger, are used more often. The hyphens are also used to indicate

pauses in conversation or only instead of quotation marks, thus, the text sometimes falls apart into a stammering chaos of symbols indicating usually lack or distortion of information, and the sense abstraction seems to be limited to a mere representation of communicative chaos. Of course, it is in a playful manner to enhance the ethos of play and teasing in the text.

2. 2. 2. Undermining the Fictional Reality

What differentiates the narrator of *Tristram Shandy* seems to be the fact that he does not merely show himself as an unreliable narrator in the usual sense of this term. It is not only the narrator that is unreliable in this novel; the quality of unreliability is ascribable to the whole fictional world. Of course, this statement is rather misleading since there is nothing in any novel besides what the reader is shown or told by the narrator⁵¹. In *Tristram Shandy*, we enter the mind of the narrator where the single events are staged and commented. The concept of staging instead of narration as mimesis is what Iser understands as the second concept of the play – its theatrical meaning – in this book. He interprets the process of narration in *Tristram Shandy* as turning representation into play, which is the only way to adumbrate what is impossible to represent.⁵² 'The novel no longer imitates a world, but becomes an imaginary set where the indefinable is acted out.'⁵³

The alternation of the staged events and commentaries (associated digressive events, essayistic speculations on whatever theme and of whatever level of discourse⁵⁴ together with the four directions described earlier in this work appear to create the unique rhythm of this novel. It would be useless to further classify the events and

⁵¹ - except for any additional commentaries such as explicative footnotes, etc. or illustrations that may change the nature of the text remarkably.

⁵² Iser 92.

⁵³ Iser 93.

⁵⁴ -be it concerning the main events, the running themes, or outside the fictional world discourses, such as reflection of the narrative and reading processes.

commentaries for centripetal and centrifugal since these tendencies are constantly changing into one another; also, this classification would depend on the point of view that means what one defines as the main aim of the narration, which in *Tristram Shandy* is rather problematic⁵⁵.

Tristram acts in a schizophrenic manner, first he represents the narrative voice and offers the stage of his mind for the reader to enter, or at least witness, and second, he treats himself as one of the characters. Tristram as a bio-psychological entity is present only rarely in the text. Of course, there are mentioned several misfortunes that happened to his body, as well as his feeble figure, however, we do not get any reflections of what he thought or how he felt about things. The only chapter where this novel resembles an autobiographical story of Tristram's life and opinions is the passage of trip to France in book VII.

Although the narration of this volume is more conventional and less distorted, it is not a conventional travel-book in which the description of the places and culture would represent the main focus. The depiction of Tristram's trip to France resembles Sterne's other book, *A sentimental Journey through France and Italy*⁵⁶ in which the narration focuses on events the traveller experienced and which were important for him internally. It is an account of details that remain in one's mind after a visit of a certain place, not a sum of objective facts about the place.

Tristram does not let any of his usual characters intrude the story of his trip. Instead, he includes pieces of conversation with people he met occasionally, such as the disjointed exchange with a lady he met on a boat at the beginning of the chapter. Tristram is consistent to depict events and situations he did not witness, such as the story

⁵⁵ Shklovsky took the labour to try to divide the matter of the novel into two categories according to their position in the narrative. His division is clear and probably unchallengeable; nevertheless the chosen prism always influences the result, and what is more the subject matter of *Tristram Shandy* seems to be so various that the effort to categorise it appears autotelic.

⁵⁶ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (Oxford University Press, 2003)

of the Abyss and Margarita⁵⁷. If he did witness them, he does not seem to mention it anywhere. This is precisely what makes his presence in the text so complex and unstable. On one hand, he is present only as the stage on – or inside of – which the events take place, in the same time, there are hints on his physique and content of his mind (such as in this chapter), however, his actual presence in the situations he describes is never verified⁵⁸.

This implied paradox served as one of the most representative features of this novel for its film adaptation, *The Cock and Bull Story*⁵⁹. Thanks to the advantages of the film medium as a visual representation using such devices as cut or camera sliding from one scene to another, the film could have worked with this paradox more coherently than the text.

The myth of *Tristram Shandy* as utterly resistant to be adapted into film shows untrue when one works with the concept of staging. Of course, it is not possible and even desirable to attempt to transfer all the aspects of the novel into film. The modern approach to film adaptations of literary works completely rejects the technique of being as faithful to the original as possible. As a more productive approach (and also a more endeavoured one) it seems to show the technique of transferring the literary form into the language of film. Similarly to the art of translation from one language to another, the translation from one medium to another should copy the same pattern of conveying the aim or message with its own devices. In this respect, this film appears to be at least trying to bring some of the narrative strategies of the novel into the film, such as the paradox mentioned above.

⁵⁷ Sterne (VII, xxi – xxvi, 453-460)

⁵⁸ In the classical authorial mode of 'I was there', or 'I was told how the story went and now I can tell you'.

⁵⁹ Directed by Michael Winterbottom, 2006.

2. 2. 3. Dynamism of the Narrative Gap

This duality of one entity, Tristram, in two different levels of the fictional world, one being on stage and the other being the stage itself, is likely to confirm the reader's suspicion of the narrative gap.

The narrative gap seems to be a crucial source of the comic in *Tristram Shandy*. The biggest difference in the nature of the narrative gap from more conventional novels with the authorial voice appears to be the fact that this gap is not static as an unchanged point of view and reference of the whole novel. Its dynamism is caused by the complex system of movements described earlier in the text. The gap seems to be carried by this movement as if floating on the rhythmical wave.

This fact creates an immense though subsurface ethos of confusion completely in accordance with Freud's main explanation of the comic feeling. The mind of the reader and in fact even the mind of the narrator oscillate between contradictory notions. The text resembles a constant flow of binary oppositions which are present in a single moment simultaneously; such as the notion of the narrator in opposition to the same entity as a character or the effort to tell a story of the birth and life in opposition to constant digressions and retardations⁶⁰. The comic feeling is likely to be created precisely by these contrasts being strengthened by the dynamicity of its nucleus.

The comic feeling is also likely to evolve into frustration from the chaos-cosmos⁶¹ of the text; however, the frustration of the reader is always one step behind the narration, which brings about the need to continue reading and experiencing more of the comic feeling and subsequent frustration. It is in fact a contradiction comparable to addiction to a destructive situation or substance, which creates a sort of meta-source of

⁶⁰ The narrator himself formulated this fact as an outcome of digressive and progressive motion of his text, both of them taking place at once (see chapter 2.2.1, extract E).

⁶¹ This term is taken from Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*. (Gilles Deleuze, *The logic of Sense* (Columbia University Press, 1990) 111.)

the comic feeling. This meta-comic together with the dynamicity of the comic nucleus of the text, the narrative gap, appear to be the main comic idiosyncrasy of *Tristram Shandy*.

The rhythm of the text as a multidirectional flow of associations causing digressions and retardation seems to be in accordance with Bergson's concept of the comic. Although the notion of rhythm connotes fluency and regularity, these features are not present in *Tristram Shandy*, at least not on the most obvious level. The reason why the whole text does not fall apart is the coherence reached by the consistency of Tristram's narration. Rather than a fluent stream of narration, the nature of this text seems to resemble stammering, as if the message was right ahead but still too far to reach.

This ethos of stammering alludes to the mechanic nature of this text⁶². It resembles a broken gramophone in which the needle always skips back never to arrive at the end. However, in case of *Tristram Shandy* the needle never skips to the same place to present the reader with the same information. Every time the needle skips, the reader is exposed to a new amount of information or commentary that prevents him/her from reaching the end. The end is not meant literally, since sooner or later the reader reaches the end; however, the catharsis from resolution of both the plot and the message underneath, does not arrive. This supposed aimlessness, no matter how misinterpreted⁶³, brings about the notion of being exposed to a machine. The novel, as a mimesis of a life-story is likely to be expected to resemble organic vivid fluidity instead of this mechanic stammering stream, which is where the Bergsonian comic deceit seems to rest; a supposedly vivid entity behaving like a mechanic system that is incapable of subordinating its singular demonstrations (episodes, speculations or in fact chapters) to the ultimate goal, which is – in the conventional notion – to tell the story.

⁶² The book is compared to a machine in many places in the text, for instance, see chapter 2.2.1. extract E.

⁶³ Sterne did not want to tell a conventional story and simulate the real world. He wanted to show how artificial every narration is, no matter how true-to-life it proclaims itself to be. Thus, this idea could be viewed as the main message of *Tristram Shandy*, there can hardly be any more contradictory and confusing aim for a narrator. Thus, the resolution may arrive by apprehension of this idea.

The Bergsonian concept of the machine can be found not only in the nature of the narration, but also in the nature of the narrator himself, since what else could be Tristram the narrator compared to more fittingly than to a juke-box-like machine working on the basis of associations⁶⁴. Interestingly enough, on these seams of discursive change in the text there are almost no other methods of thinking applied, be it deduction, induction or comparison. In this respect, Tristram's mind processes and the narration that represents them in language are considerably consistent.

All the three Bergson's principles of situational comic can be applied to tendencies of Tristram's mind, thus also narration. This fact corresponds with the ethos of this novel as a staged play, since the language based narration resembles a staged situation. The *Jack-in-the box* principle, a situation in which a constant useless effort is applied never to arrive at the desired aim is present almost everywhere in the text. The most obvious example could be the ever-started and ever-mentioned story of Tristram's birth, or the urge to describe the character of uncle Toby. According to Shklovsky, the repetition serves to restore the feeling of forgotten matter and is part of Sterne's general plan of retardation by replacement⁶⁵.

This technique is interconnected with the snow-ball principle as well, since at every point in which the Jack-in-the-box begins its backward movement, there is a new amount of information that sticks to the snowball. However, we are again reminded of the previously discussed matter.⁶⁶ Metaphorically speaking, the structure of *Tristram Shandy* could be described in the Bergsonian terminology as the Jack-in-the-box riding the snowball, always thrusting through the newly added layers.

The dancing-Jack principle could be paralleled with the meta-comic effects of the text as it takes place mainly in the reader; the dancing Jack is the reader him/herself and

⁶⁴ More on this matter to be found in chapter 3.1.

⁶⁵ See chapter 2.3.

⁶⁶ This strategy is discussed in chapter 2.3.

the puppeteer refers to the narrator or in fact the body of the text. The narrator (though often taking this position openly by addressing the reader and giving him/her orders, and thus confirming his sovereignty over the text) admits several times that he is the one being controlled by another entity.

'HOLLA! – you chairman! – here's a sixpence – do step into that bookseller's shop, and call me a day-tall critick. I am very willing to give any one of'em a crown to help me with his tackling, to get my father and my uncle Toby off the stairs, and put them to bed.' (IV, xiii, 256)

He is controlled by the entity of the narrative material. Viktor Shklovsky in his *Theory of Prose* describes the narrative of Tristram Shandy as that of a hero who wants to tell the story of his birth and childhood but is constantly pushed back by the material that rushes into the book and prevents the hero even from reaching the starting point of his birth. It seems that the Bergsonian principle is doubled, since the reader is under the influence of the narrator that means text and the text itself is being ruled by some higher ungraspable and indescribable force. This fact appears to support the concept of ludistic confusion that is created with one reason only, that is, for the pleasure of the play.

2. 3. Viktor Shklovsky and the Comic Development of Sujet

Viktor Shklovsky represents the school of Russian formalism. He advocated for the distinction between *sujet* and *fabula*, that means between the way in which the reader is presented the information, the way the novel is construed and the actual events as they could have taken place in the fictional reality with their necessary causality and chronology. He asserts that the conventional definition of art as thinking in images is not

satisfactory⁶⁷ and argues further, that what makes literature art is not its imaginative content, but the unusualness or oddity of its form. Together with Kant⁶⁸, Shklovsky takes the opinion that art does not need to fulfil any other purpose of its existence except for the aesthetic one. Sharing information, no matter how imaginative they are, is not the distinctive quality of art. It is the form that is intentionally more complicated than usual speech or functional writing styles.

In other words, art complicates the meaning. The abstraction of meaning from any art including literature is conditioned by its odd form. Only thanks to this intentional difficulty, art, according to Shklovsky, may survive different epochs. The oddity of the form leaves space for transformation of the way the meaning is abstracted, which is necessary for reception in different epochs and cultures. The unusual form also serves to show usual matters in new contexts and thus creates new meanings and reveals nuances of the already known ones which we reflected only superficially. This happens through aesthetic viewing only.

Although Shklovsky opens his chapter on *Tristram Shandy* by saying that he does not aim towards an analysis of this novel but rather the other way round, he wants to use this novel to support and illustrate his opinions on general laws of prose, his analysis of *Tristram Shandy* seems to be one of the most detailed as well as complex ones. He noticed that there are two basic categories of material interwoven in an elaborate system. They are the main story and the purveying material which further splits into different thematic lines, such as midwifery of the importance of one's nose for one's character⁶⁹. The structure, as Shklovsky understands it, appears to resemble a complex braid in which each hair is not of single colour only. Also, Shklovsky defined several basic methods that are applied in this novel, thus rejecting that it is an impenetrable chaos.

⁶⁷ Šklovskij 9-10.

⁶⁸ In his *Critique of Judgment*.

⁶⁹ As it was stated above, this division is rather too schematic. The very idea whether there is a 'main plot-line' in this novel seems to be questionable. However, for the purposes of his formal analysis, this scheme appears to be necessary.

Shklovsky seems to occupy a position of a *tristramological* myth buster, explaining and classifying what was considered too vague and indefinable to be subjugated to a theory.

According to Shklovsky, the most general tendency of the text is retardation by replacement. The readers of each period are used to certain paradigms, some of which are constant. They are absent only in the most orthodox literary experiments. An absolute majority of novels that preceded Sterne were strictly chronological and the fictional events succeeded each other in the causal relation, except for a classical frame of narration within narration which was used already in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Sterne was aware of the conventional nature of narration. By playing with the conventions and breaking them, it seems that he wanted his creation to resemble the processes of human mind rather than narration which is habitually accepted as a representation of real life. In a usual fictional reality the actual events, associations, time and space are controlled by narrative conventions, almost twisted and squeezed in order to fit in if necessary. However, this is not the case of *Tristram Shandy*. The narrator does not allow the conventions to take over his narration.

In *Tristram Shandy*, the reader is informed about the consequences usually before he/she is told the causes. This appears to be one of the basic laws of this novel. Shklovsky mentions the example of Mr. and Mrs. Shandy's interrupted coitus. First, the reader learns, that Mrs. Shandy asked the question whether Mr. Shandy remembered to wind the clock and that it made him angry because she interrupted him in the middle of something. This situation is alluded to several times, before the reader is finally revealed that the question was asked in the middle of their coitus and that it was the coitus during which Tristram was begotten. This information is exposed after many discussions of humours and particles of life which were affected by this disruption. This lead to their misbalance in Tristram's body and caused many miseries of his life.

Retardation by replacement does not relate to one sequence of the narrative only, it is developed as a returning motive. Another example could be that of the nature of uncle Toby. First, the reader is promised to be given an account of uncle Toby's character in the middle of his sentence (that ends many chapters later):

'I think, says he:----But to enter my uncle Toby's sentiments upon this matter, you must be made to enter first a little into his character, the outline of which, I will just give you. (I, xxi, 56)

On the following four pages during which the digression on aunt Dinah is started, the reader in fact gets some information on Toby's character, such as, that he was an utter gentleman, but did not talk to women much, if it was not for Mrs. Shandy who seems to be an exception. Also, the groin injury is mentioned. However, the impression that the reader knows nothing about uncle Toby yet is kept and strengthened by reminding him/her that the account of his nature is yet to come.

'For God's sake, my uncle Toby would cry,----and for my sake, and for all our sakes, my dear brother Shandy,--do let this story of our aunt's and her ashes sleep in peace;---how can you, how can you have so little feeling and compassion for the character of our family:----' (I, xxi, 61)

This example is a piece of conversation between Toby and Walter and 'the character of the family', means reputation or the nature of the whole family. However, it seems to be interpretable also as Toby's cry directed to Tristram ('brother Shandy' may not refer only to factual relation, but also to 'fellow Shandy') to stop telling the story of aunt Dinah and give way to his character – a character of, meaning ranking among, the Shandy family. It is not a typical technique that the characters beg the narrator to

concentrate on them and to stop telling useless digressive episodes. It is indeed unique even for this novel. It adds a new kind of reflexivity in the novel; the characters are aware of their being literary characters. However, this kind of reflexivity in this novel is not established as much as self-reflexivity of the narration and even in the situation described above, it stems from the interpretation.

The notion of the reader not knowing the character of uncle Toby is mentioned through the following three chapters:

'I was just going, for example, to have given you the great out-lines of my uncle Toby's most whimsical character;--- when my aunt Dinah and her coachman came across us, (...)' (I, xxii, 63)

Finally, the reader is promised to be explained uncle Toby's nature with the help of telling him/her about his hobby-horse:

'If I was not morally sure that the reader must be out of all patience for my uncle Toby's character,----I would here previously have convinced him, that there is no instrument so fit to draw such a thing with, as that which I have pitch'd upon.' (I, xxiv, 67)

Here again, the concept of teasing appears, since the structure along which this situation is built resembles a spiral. On each level the reader knows a bit more, but is again on the same spot in the vertical perspective. He is returned to the fact of not knowing the character and the end of the sentence of uncle Toby, without any hint on what the relation of both to the story of Tristram's birth is.

Sterne was most probably very well aware of the comic potential of this technique, since he prepares the reader for different solutions, developing a situation with misunderstanding⁷⁰ to finally surprise the reader. Confusion deriving from misunderstanding together with the surprise of the result is likely to bring about the comic feeling. There are many similar spirals, for instance the place of the wound of uncle Toby; however, in this case the victim of misunderstanding, impending or already experienced is not the reader but one of the characters, widow Wadman.

When she finally consents to be shown the place where Toby was wounded, instead of learning whether he is capable of sexual intercourse, which is the real merit of her interest and the reader knows it – she is shown the geographic, not the anatomic spot of the wound⁷¹. Thus, the reader does not experience the awkwardness and curiousness for the fact that he does not know enough. More likely, it is the other way round. The reader experiences the awkwardness precisely because he/she knows why the misunderstanding originated and he/she is curious about its result.

Besides the theme of the genitals and coitus which are common in the comic discourse probably ever since⁷² and the aspect of surprise, this situation also works with the concept of naive comic; its subject is Toby and its victim widow Wadman. Toby's lack of understanding for the widow's concern's, and his actions based on wrong assumptions (as well as on his hobby-horse), bring about comic effect precisely because the reader has more information and is able to recognise the misunderstanding. His actions resemble the classical naive comic of a child⁷³ as well as the Freudian concept of spared energy. Thanks to our knowledge of widow Wadman's interest, we can imagine our behaviour in Toby's

⁷⁰ Šklovskij 175.

⁷¹ Such sort of polysemy causing misunderstanding between the characters or between the narrator and the reader is a usual comic device of Sterne. An iconic example could be his description of a hobby-horse as if he was speaking of an actual horse, although there the misunderstanding is rather alluded to than produced directly. The comic effect is likely to arrive nevertheless.

⁷² The possible reasons for their being comic may be found in the Bible. In some interpretations of certain Biblical passages the sudden exposure – seemingly coincidental - of these bodily parts is taken as God's punishment which is executed by laughter of the other people. (E.R.Curtius, *Evropská literatura a latinský středověk* (Triada 1998) 496)

⁷³ As described by Borecký in his *Theory of the Comic*. (Vladimír Borecký, *Teorie komiky* (Hynek 2000) 34.

situation with sparing much more energy than he has used in his effort to show her the place of his wound; thus, we tend to laugh at him. The narrator puts us intentionally in the superior position to uncle Toby. This situation also appears to be an accurate representation of Bergson's dancing-Jack principle, only with the exception that the character of the puppeteer and its victim is the same person. Uncle Toby confuses himself. He misleads himself (with the help of his hobby-horse) and acts on the basis of his own wrong assumptions. The comic result is strengthened first, by the fact that there is widow Wadman as a contrast to uncle Toby. She is the character who unlike uncle Toby knows what she asked him and is consequently aware of the misunderstanding (although she does not admit it). Second, the comic effect is strengthened by its delay and by its being alluded to in advance. It may be argued whether this situation if told in one sentence without all the structural interferences would be of such – if any – comic potential.

Shklovsky does not ascribe Sterne (although it seems more logical to use the reference to the narrator rather than to the author) any motivation for this technique. 'Sterne's motivation is autotelic.'⁷⁴ He views retardation by replacement as an artistic device, perhaps as a barren method or a device to underline the principles upon which this method functions. He does not connect this technique neither to the conceptual substructure, the Lockean human understanding processes, nor to the strategy of strengthening the comic effect.

2. 3. 1. The Narrative *Now*

Shklovsky's main thesis about *Tristram Shandy* is that the actual content of this novel is the self-realization of the form that is reached by its constant disruption⁷⁵. On the examples of retardation by replacement it was demonstrated how Sterne broke the

⁷⁴ Šklovskij 176.

⁷⁵ Šklovskij 176.

conventions of narration only to make it different and more interesting to read (according to Shklovsky); however, there are also situations in which the structure, though disrupted greatly, does not seem to be broken, instead rather focused on. This would be the case of the time-spatial lapses in the novel.

As stated above, Shklovsky differentiates between two categories of the narrative material. Although the narration uses the past tense predominantly, the category of the main story of Tristram's birth could serve as a referential point of *now*, as oppose to associative descriptions of, firstly, the events that took place earlier, secondly, anticipation of the future, and finally, thematically related essayistic or speculative passages. The concept of the narrative *now*, or rather its self-realisation and odd behaviour, similarly to the concept of the narrative gap, represents a major source of the structural comic in this novel. Sterne allowed simultaneous actions, but he parodied the way the action develops and how a new episode intrudes into it.⁷⁶

Most of the time comic in *Tristram Shandy* seems to be deriving from the paradox of the simultaneous action narration⁷⁷. Sterne's contemporary, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing⁷⁸ gave an explanation of the main difference between painting and poetry, which in this case could be broadened to literature in general. The difference is that painting takes place in space whereas literature takes place in time, due to its necessary device – language. Thus, it could be concluded that although language is capable of describing spatial relations, the notion of simultaneity of a single scenery is broken by the fact that the language needs time to be heard or read. A scenery stands for objects co-existing simultaneously at a certain place. However, the object with which we start our description seems to be no longer there once we change our focal point and move in space to another object and also due to the duration of the actual description as well. It is

⁷⁶ Šklovskij 177.

⁷⁷ Šklovskij 177.

⁷⁸ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Hamburgská dramaturgie, Lákoón, Stati* (Odeon, 1980) 15.

impossible to express a visual work of art without imposing chronology and also significance to its parts due to the duration and used order of their description.

If one wants to describe an event in a past tense narration,⁷⁹ one has to face the fact that the event itself took place in time – had a certain duration unlike a static scenery – and what is more, everything that is once described continues to evolve outside the scene. Sterne was aware of this inadequacy of narration or language in general, and by directly pointing our attention to this paradox, he used it as a platform for his formal plays⁸⁰. Very often he shows this paradox remaining completely in the fictional world. Shklovsky lists several situations where a character is left in the middle of an action and is brought back afterwards, with the narrator pointing to the fact that since he has not spoken of him/her since then, it still holds the same position, or is in the same situation.

'I think, replied my uncle Toby, taking his pipe from his mouth, and striking the head of it two or three times upon the nail of his left thumb, as he began his sentence, - I think, says he: - but to enter rightly into my uncle Toby's sentiments upon this matter, you must be made to enter first a little into his character, the out-lines of which I shall just give you, and then the dialogue between him and my father will go on as well again.' (I, xxi, 56)

Uncle Toby finishes his sentence in chapter VI of volume II. The first time the narrator reminds us of uncle Toby is after a short essayistic digression on instability⁸¹.

'But I forgot my uncle Toby, whom all this time we have left knocking the ashes out of his tobacco pipe.' (I, xxi, 58)

⁷⁹ The case of the present-tense narration seems to be rather different. Its habitual usage in stage directions and screenplays probably holds shows a certain kind of imagined performativity.

⁸⁰ Šklovskij 176.

⁸¹ Šklovskij 177.

Such reminders develop before the reader learns the end of Toby's sentence. Except for the narrative spiral with its comic effect described above, the comic in this technique seems to be at least of two important aspects. First, it is the incongruence between the reader's efforts to construe a reality out of the narration, but the fact that he is reminded that it is a fake reality construed only thanks to an utterance of the narrator undermines this effort and brings about the comic oscillating confusion. Second, the incongruence may rest in the actual outcome of the situation. Similarly to the situation with widow Wadman, the reader is manipulated towards a false direction of meaning. Here, thanks to the prolonged tension and systematically strengthened curiousness of the reader, he/she is likely to expect an announcement of remarkably high importance. However, the sentence ends:

' – it would not be amiss, brother, if we rung the bell.' (II, v, 88);

Not only that a suggestion to ring the bell does not seem to be of high importance for the story or any running or subsurface themes of the purveying material, it does not bring any resolution to the tension of curiousness. This situation precisely refers to Kant's definition of the comic feeling⁸². He says that it is an expectation suddenly dispersed into nothing. Our expectation is strengthened to this frustrating and in fact non-existing closure.

There are at least two similar situations that always have their turn in *tristramological* analysis⁸³. They are, sending Obaddiah for Dr. Slop and Walter and Toby going down the stairs. The principle of these two situations, meaning the way they are narrated, and of the situation described above is very similar. However, the case of Toby's sentence utilises only the movements forwards and backwards and thus prevails entirely

⁸² Jan Orlický, *Záhady komična* (Futura 2003) 23.

⁸³ Both described also by Shklovsky.

within the text. The following two situations are different, since the reminiscences are directed outside the text.

Obaddiah who had been sent for Dr. Slop, is mentioned several times before he returns.

'It's about an hour and a half's tolerable good reading since my uncle Toby rung the bell, when Obaddiah was ordered to saddle a horse and go for Dr. Slop, the man-midwife,---so that no one can say, with reason, that I have no allowed Obaddiah time enough, poetically speaking, and considering the emergency too, both go and come;---tho' , morally and trully speaking, the man, perhaps, has scarce had time to get on his boots.' (II, viii, 92)

Here, it is evident, how the narrator mixes up the fictional reality with the reality outside the text; first, on the evidence of the reference to the duration of reading and second, using the expression 'poetically speaking, and considering the emergency too' he points to the fact of narration being dependent on his opinions and decisions about it. Such technique causes estrangement and the comic effect is likely to rest again in the incongruence between the readers effort to construe a reality in his/her mind based on the text, with the text constantly refusing it referring to the fact of the process of narration. After a comprehensive argument about how long it could or could not have lasted to ride a horse eight miles for Dr. Slop and back and that if one counts the duration of reading, it would not suffice even to tie Obaddiah's shoes, the situation is resolved as follows:

'Obaddiah had not got above threescore yards from the stable-yard before he met with Dr. Slop;'

Again, in this example, we can observe the expectation dispersing into nothing. The whole discussion of the distance and time showed unnecessary since Obaddiah did not even set off on the trip. The reader also experiences a lesson of how useless and far from the practical life can theorising and speculating be.

Shklovsky mentions the canonical sequence of Walter and Toby going down the stairs in five chapters⁸⁴, taking one step only at the beginning of each chapter. After several steps, between which there is digressive, purveying material, the narrator calls for help from a literary critic to help him guide the two men down the stairs⁸⁵. The comic incongruence of this call for help may rest in the contradiction with how Tristram usually presents himself through his manipulative narration, that is, as a ruler of the fictional world. Nevertheless, here he occupies the position of a victim being overruled by the associative flow of narration and by the material that keeps on intruding into what he presents to be his intention – to tell how the two men got down the stairs and presumably, continue telling the story of his birth.

2. 3. 2. The Comic Body in *Tristram Shandy*

As a result of the narrator's freezing his characters in a certain situation, there seems to have originated a side-effect mentioned by Shklovsky. What is more, this side-effect appears to be of great importance for the comic of this novel; it is the descriptions of body postures. According to Shklovsky, Sterne was the first one to introduce the description of human body arrangements into literature. Although it may not be proven true or false whether Sterne was acquainted with Lessing's *Laocoon*, the fact that they shared the epoch seems to justify its position in attempts to analyze *Tristram Shandy*.

⁸⁴ Sterne (IV, ix-xiii, 252-257).

⁸⁵ Sterne (IV, xiii, 256)

In *Laocoon*, it is stated that for some scenes, situations or emotions, it is better to use language instead of visual arts such as painting or sculpture; especially for great emotions, since if we see (meaning also imagine due to a literary description) a great hero groaning from pain, we feel sorry for him and experience the fall of greatness embodied in him⁸⁶. However, if this hero remains in this position of for instance agonic groan too long (being depicted on canvas or sculpted) the tragic groan changes into a pathetic grin worthy of derision. Therefore, literature is a better means to depict such scene.

In *Tristram Shandy* there are no heroes of tragic or mythical dimensions; however, the moment of freezing in a certain position in order to be subjugated to a detailed description, or in order to wait in this position till the narrator tells whatever digressions, inserted episodes or arguments, appears to bring about the comic effect⁸⁷. Such situations are very common in *Tristram Shandy*. The character's are as if sculpted or painted with the use of words. For instance, Mrs. Shandy freezes in a position of surprise and suspicion with her finger on her lips⁸⁸ as she heard the conversation between Walter and Toby and was sure they were talking about her and Mr. Shandy froze for many pages lying '[...]stretched across the bed as still as if the hand of death had pushed him down for a full hour and a half[...]' (IV, II, 246).

The most renowned description of a posture in this novel is probably the one in which Mr. Shandy tries to take off his wig, while stretching his left hand to his right pocket. After a relatively short, almost laconic description within one sentence, Tristram continues with a sentence:

'Now, in this, I think my father was much to blame; an I will give you my reasons for it.' (III, ii, 142)

⁸⁶ Lessing 285.

⁸⁷ The same could be applied to uncle Toby stuck in the movement of knocking the ashes out of his tobacco pipe.

⁸⁸ Mrs. Shandy froze in this position in chapter v of volume V (page 322). The reader is promised to return to her in five minutes. After ten pages (in V, xi, 331), the narrator remembers: 'Am I a Turk if I had not [...] forgotten my mother [...]'!

After this sentence there are in fact two chapters on the topic of his father's posture. Tristram makes a historical excursion about the usual height of the coat pockets, resolving, that:

'It was not an easy matter in any king's reign, (unless you were as lean a subject as myself) to have forced your hand diagonally, quite across your whole body, so as to gain the bottom of your opposite coat-pocket.' (III, iii, 144)

Although Mr. Shandy did not freeze in this position in the same way as his wife (he was not completely motionless), the space – and time – consumed on this matter on the two pages make Mr. Shandy freeze similarly to her. His position is not reminisced in the following chapters; thus, it is not used in terms of developing the sujet. However, the few seconds that Mr. Shandy probably took to get himself into this posture are developed on the two following pages.

There are several reasons for the possible comic effect of this technique. First, the Freudian pleasure from the spared energy (which is pointed out and elaborated) seems applicable to this situation. The reader is amused by Mr. Shandy's purposeless effort, not only concerning the main process of posturing, but also the idea of purposelessness is enhanced in the reader by the extensive speculation on this topic. Second, during this speculation, the impression is made in the reader that Mr. Shandy remains in this position the whole time. This aspect of this scene resembles a paused action; as if one paused a film that one is watching. It resembles also the static, panoramic descriptions of sceneries or their film takes which also concentrate on one segment of time and space. The manner in which the body movements are described seems to refer to the mechanistic or even atomistic notion of time and space, which refers to the Bergsonian concept of comic rigidity and mechanic deceit.

However, there appears to be much more incongruence in this situation. The main incongruence seems to rest again in the way Sterne broke the narrative conventions. Except for the novels in which the bodily daily routine, such as postures, eating or hygiene is part of an aesthetic plan, these matters do not usually get focussed on. It seems unavoidable for the reader to view the preciseness of the description (that is to be abstracted mainly from the following speculation) as a narrative deviation. This deviation appears to create incongruence in several respects. The reader is falsely led to the notion of importance of the whole situation due to the space given to the description and its preciseness. However, the reader is likely to interpret the situation as completely unimportant and unworthy of such an extensive depiction. The double incongruence, first, that such situation is focused on and second, that it is depicted so extensively, is likely to bring about the comic oscillation of mind.

The last aspect of the incongruence in the description of this situation is the one of the panoramic mode. Mr. Shandy is given so much attention as if he were a sight of major size and significance. The same holds for another canonical description, the one of Dr. Slop on his horse⁸⁹. Sterne read and admired the works of Francois Rabelais, who uses a similar technique of description. According to Bakhtin, in Rabelais '[...]grotesque fantasy is combined with the precision of anatomical and physiological analysis. In all [...] descriptions of battles and beatings, we get, alongside grotesque exaggeration, precise anatomical descriptions of the injuries, wounds and deaths inflicted on the human body.'⁹⁰ This mode of description seems to make a statue of the characters or a painting of the whole scene. Thus, it can be examined almost millimetre by millimetre.

As it was already stated, besides this specific bodily comic, the frozen postures are used as a point of reference for Sterne's technique of developing the narrative by its constant retardation. The novel is full of references to human body. It is a narrative that is aware of the human body and reflects its physical and physiological properties. The

⁸⁹ Sterne (II, ix, 93)

⁹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* (University of Texas Press, 1972) 172.

comic of these reflections is most probably explainable with the help of Bakhtin's assertions on the comic potential of some aspects and parts of the human body. The parts that the narration focuses on are more visible for the fact that Tristram's presence in the text is not firmly established and besides these parts and a brief image of his overall appearance, the reader does not get any specific idea of Tristram as a biological entity.

The parts that stand out of the shady idea of Tristram are, of course, nose and genitals, the genitals being also an important motif for the character of Toby. According to Bakhtin, these parts fall into the category of the grotesque body. They are marginal parts, often being a target of hyperbolisation in the *collective carnival body*⁹¹. In works of Francois Rabelais⁹² the grotesque body plays a major role. The body of Tristram is not a representation of the collective carnival body, however, the same as in the collective grotesque carnival body, his marginal parts are pointed out. In case of Tristram and also even uncle Toby, these parts are focussed on thanks to their injuries. Tristram's nose was squeezed during his birth, his penis circumcised by a window and Toby was wounded in the area of groins and presumably also genitals. All these accidents are mentioned often in the text as events of major importance for both characters. For Tristram they represent a *destinative* principle, perhaps because they happened during his childhood, whereas for Toby it means only a difficulty in his relationship with widow Wadman.

These marginal parts of body belong to the inventory of the low narrative mode. The fact that they play such an important role and are so extensively referred to probably creates the incongruence that enhances the comic that this discourse has in itself.

⁹¹ As defined by Bakhtin in his *Rabelais and his World*.

⁹² The inspiration Sterne must have found in Rabelais concerns also the lengthy lists of items that interestingly enough seem to be of certain comic potential, probably explainable with the help of Bergson's machine-caused comic.

3. The Comic of *Tristram Shandy* under the prism of John Locke and Jean Paul

3. 1. John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*

3. 1. 1. John Locke and Associative Thinking

Associations appear to create a bordering system that interconnects the structure and the actual content. The fact that Sterne, or Tristram uses them in such an extensive manner is related to the influence of John Locke, mainly his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke stresses the significance of subjectivity in perceptive and intellectual processes. In the section⁹³ 'Of the Association of Ideas' he calls associative thinking 'both a dangerous deviation and an inevitable and universal mode of thought'⁹⁴.

Tristram Shandy could easily be interpreted as a representation of this thesis; as an outcome of what happens when the principle of association completely takes over one's mind. That means, Tristram's associative narration draws from this approach only without the ultimate brake that saves the humans from associative madness; the brake in Locke's understanding seems to be the divine mind, which serves us the metaphysical regulation of our concepts to its requirements⁹⁵. Nevertheless, it is rather difficult to indicate the way this regulation is realized in practical activity.

The accidental nature of associations can very well lead to a complete misunderstanding of the world. In this respect, *Tristram Shandy* seems to be comparable to Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49*. This novel of postmodern paranoia and inability to classify the information one is surrounded by shares the same message as *Tristram Shandy*, only with a major difference – it does not reflect the associative madness in its structure, it does so only in its plot.

⁹³ Locke added this section in his fourth edition of the Essay. (Moglen 15)

⁹⁴ Moglen 14.

⁹⁵ Moglen 18.

Locke distinguishes between natural⁹⁶ connections in our mind and the unnatural ones; these are undesirable and guilty of many vices of human intellect and character; however, he does not instruct the reader on how to avoid the destructive aspects of association or on which ideas are liable to this unnatural connection⁹⁷. The reason why he does not even attempt for such an instruction probably rests in his assertion that our will has no power over our mental processes and thus cannot determine our knowledge.

These thoughts of John Locke stand at the birth of subjective psychology. The concept of subjectivity, or rather its advantages is ambiguous to a certain extent. On one hand, it encompasses all impulses and perceived ideas and creates a meaningful structure out of them, whereas, on the other hand, it always holds one back to oneself. As it was suggested by Montaigne, the only knowledge one has, is limited to oneself only. Montaigne applied this approach in a less complex way, since what he was putting into question was actual knowledge, the sum of which may be considered facts. Locke takes this problem to a much deeper level, questioning not only the result of our learning (our knowledge) but also the ways learning and perception are done, or rather, happen. It could be argued that this path was indeed started by Montaigne, mainly in his *Essay on Cannibals* where the question of cultural perspective, thus a pre-given bias to learning new information, is introduced. However, Locke goes much further and to a much more general level.

Locke noticed what became the major interest of the twentieth century analytic philosophy, the fact that the mind is inevitably determined by language. He defines a human being as⁹⁸ 'isolated in his extreme individuality, conditioned by his own history, limited by the conventional language which is his primary tool, driven in his relationship by private concerns, with recourse only to the relative concepts which have no stable and

⁹⁶ Moglen 16.

⁹⁷ Moglen 16.

⁹⁸ Moglen 23.

positive authority. The only truth he can achieve is that gained through his own organisation of the chaos of experimental fact.'

All of the concepts mentioned in this quotation - that could easily be called an essence of Sterne's inspiration in Locke - individuality, personal history, conventional language, private concerns, lack of precise and objectively authenticated concepts and finally the need for one's own organisation – are depicted in *Tristram Shandy*.

Tristram narrates from his individual perspective, he stages the events in his mind and depicts the record of that. It could be argued whether, by this insight into one's personal psychology, Sterne wanted to show individuality with its limitations, thus being faithful to the processes as he understood them from Locke. If this was his goal⁹⁹ it would in fact negate Locke's thesis that no mind is penetrable by another. Sterne could have used his unconventional narrative, which is nothing else than a structured use of language, to create the mind of Tristram and show it to the reader in all its complexity and authenticity. This would make him appear to want to surpass Locke by showing in practice what he only suggested in theory. Of course, his conceptual intention will remain unknown as well as the fact whether he even wanted to write a novel¹⁰⁰ or another, perhaps more cogitative, literary form.

On the other hand, Sterne could have wanted to show that even when the use of language is freed from its conventions and made more resemble his (deriving from Locke's) understanding of perception and sense construction principles, it is still impossible to understand someone else's life and opinions¹⁰¹ completely. In fact, 'emphasizing the relativity of perception and description, Sterne occupies a position closer to that of Berkeley and Hume¹⁰² questioning the actual existence of any abstract

⁹⁹ However, for instance Shklovsky was sure that the disruption of the narrative has no ideological motivation.

¹⁰⁰ Moglen 29.

¹⁰¹ Here, the choice to use *opinions* instead of more conventional *adventures* in the title could show the effort for greater individuation and subjectivity of the matter depicted in the book.

¹⁰² Moglen 23.

objective ideas and thus, even the possibility of acquiring any concepts outside one's own mind.

Tristram Shandy is not only a representation of some of the philosophical theses of Sterne's period, more likely, it is a polemic with them. Besides Tristram, the narrator who is, according to Moglen, an ironic representation of Locke's idea of the human mind¹⁰³, the polemic seems obvious in other character's as well. In other characters of this novel Sterne offers an alternative to Locke's absolute preference of reason. He shows that purely rational approach, when applied over-extensively, is what hinders effective communication or even one's own perception and learning. An alternative that helps overcome such obstacles is known as intuition¹⁰⁴. Here again, Bergson's theory of the comic could be recognized. The contest between intuition (referring to Bergson's vividness) and reason (referring to mechanism) seems to always be won by intuition and the over-extensive use of reason seems to be a major source of the comic.

3. 1. 2. Association as a Comic Characterisation

There are two pairs of main characters that represent these two contradictory concepts. They are Dr. Slop and Walter Shandy for reason and uncle Toby and Corporal Trim for intuition. These four character's (together with Yorick) meet in a scene before which little Tristram experienced the accidental circumscription; Dr. Slop is called into the house. The four men's discussion evolves freely around the topic of Tristram and Walter's *Tristrapaedia*.

The destructivity of Walter's approach rests first in the fact that he tries to apply theory and system even to the most natural needs such as reproduction or sexual desire, and second, because of the fact that he '[...] spun his [knowledge], every thread of it, out

¹⁰³ Moglen 21.

¹⁰⁴ Moglen 22.

of his own brain,[...]' . (V, xvi, 336) Walter lacks institutional education that would help him sort his knowledge and work with it effectively¹⁰⁵.

A fruit of his scientific efforts is his project of *Tristrapeadia*. Trying to create an ideal guide for his son, he is always one step (or more) behind real life and Tristram's advance and development. Instead of breeding his son intuitively, his over-thought effort is seen as impossible to apply.

'... the misfortune was, that I was all that time totally neglected and abandoned to my mother; and what was almost as bad, by the very delay, the first part of the work [*Tristrapaedia*], upon which my father had spent the most of his pains, was rendered entirely useless,----every day a page or two became of no consequence.'

A truly destructive effect of his theoretisation of the natural world is that of Tristram's name. Tristram accepts his father's assertions about his name bringing misfortune as well as the assertion that, by squeezing his nose, he had also his character squeezed. Iser even calls Walter Shandy the most Quixotic character of the whole novel¹⁰⁶, since no matter how reality resists, he always falls into the same manner of thinking. Walter confirms the inadequacy of pure reason in everyday struggles no matter how insignificant the practical matters. By his extensive use of speculation, his way of thinking resembles the Bergsonian Jack-in-the-box.

Toby creates the counterpart to Walter as we can see in his reply to Walter's lamentation upon Tristram:

¹⁰⁵ However, as it is obvious in the case of Dr. Slop, institutional education is not enough for efficient communication.

¹⁰⁶ Iser 101.

'There has been certainly, continued my father, the duce and all to do in some part or other of the ecliptic, when this offspring of mine was formed.--- (...) --- The trine and sextil aspects have jumped awry, --- or the oposite of their ascendants have not hit it as they should,---or the lords of the genitures (as they call them) have been at bo-peep,---or something has been wrong above or bellow us.' (...)

But is the child, cried my uncle Toby, the worse?' (V, xxviii, 347-348)

Toby does not seem to consider any knowledge that does not draw from or help with practical life or, more accurately, with his own practical life. That means, in a discussion of any topic, he always slides towards the theme of fortification, battles or equipment. His servant, corporal Trim, takes this even further to the most basic needs. The following extract represents Trim's contribution to the discussion of radical moisture and radical heat:

'I infer, an' please your worship, replied Trim, that the radical moisture is nothing in the world but ditch-water and that the radical heat, of those who can go to the expense of it, is burnt brandy (...)' (V, xl, 362)

Dr. Slop represents a classical parody on highly learned though not wise scholars. His response is empty of meaning which he covers by using strange inhorn terms, which none of the other characters understand, thus the effect of his utterance on the conversation is close to none.

'(...) /radical heat and moisture/ is inherent in the seeds of all animals, and may be preserved sundry ways, but principally, in my opinion by consubstantials, imperiments and occludents.' (V, xl, 362)

The parody is underlined by the reactions of the other man, who do not want to be considered stupid for not having understood Dr. Slop.

'Very likely, said my uncle. ----I'm sure of it – quoth Yorick.' (V, xl, 362)

These paths of thinking of the above characters are only the results of the associations which their minds prefer, though unconsciously. This disputation is comic for many reasons, such as the already mentioned jack-in-the-box obstinacy; however, the main feature of this dispute seems to be incongruence par-excellence. The characters' processes of intellection cross each other almost without any point of intersection. There are many examples of such inadequacy of communication in literature, such as in the theatre of the absurd, or the inability to understand the mind/moral/philosophical set of another character depicted in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. However, in *Tristram Shandy*, this condition of human communication seems to be only a material for play; Sterne does not seem to want to make any deeper point about it except for parodying it. His characters talk according to their thoughts and their thoughts are controlled by their nature¹⁰⁷.

As it was already stated, Locke noticed that the human mind is conditioned by language it uses and thus it is also formed by it. Sterne must have been of the same opinion, since he uses certain levels of language as an object of parody. According to Bakhtin, in Sterne's works 'we find the same parodic stylization of various levels and genres of literary language [...]. The parodic and objectivized incorporation into their work of various types of literary language penetrates the deepest levels of literary and ideological thought itself resulting in a parody of the logical and expressive structure of any ideological discourse¹⁰⁸ as such (scholarly, moral and rhetorical, poetic) that is almost

¹⁰⁷ For more on the depiction of nature or character in this novel, see chapter 3.2.

¹⁰⁸ In its narrow sense, meaning 'discussion'.

as radical as the parody we find in Rabelais.¹⁰⁹ Sterne worked with the fact that one's mode of thought (that consists of an inclination to certain associations by great measure) externalises itself in the character's language. Not only did he use different levels of language for different characters as it was shown in the extracts above, Sterne also used the fact of language stratification as a matter for parody.

3.1.3. Associations and Personal History

Except for the role of associations as an indicator of the characters' inclination to a certain mode of thinking, they serve as a connector to the narrator's personal history. As it was stated above, they occur on the seams between sections of different time and theme, or in other words as connectors of the four discursive movements described earlier in the text¹¹⁰. The fact that they let the reader occasionally skim through Tristram's personal history deserves to be discussed in further detail.

In terms of an individual personalised hero, Laurence Sterne already had predecessors to draw from, both from abroad and in his homeland. Cervantes, Montaigne and the Augustans, mainly Jonathan Swift are mentioned most often in this respect¹¹¹. Cervantes's *Don Quixote* must have served as a model for Sterne of a character whose psychology or idea of the world is in contradiction with so-called objective reality, although *Tristram Shandy* shows that objective reality or truth may not exist. Sterne thus placed the reality into the head of his main hero and narrator. It is the only place where a notion of reality may reside.

Montaigne might be the first writer to depict a person as a completely discrete entity ruled by principles that are predominantly within him/herself. He is generally considered to be an inventor of essay as a genre and the subjective perspective that he

¹⁰⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* (University of Texas Press, 1972) 85.

¹¹⁰ In chapter 2.2.1.

¹¹¹ Moglen 28.

occupies in his *Essays* seems to resemble the nature of the speculative passages in *Tristram Shandy*.

The Augustans appear to be the most important inspiration for Sterne. Unlike Cervantes who narrates his *Don Quixote* in the third person narrative, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* are narrated in the first person. According to Moglen, 'Swift was the first to use the fully characterised persona as the focal point of his work, as a means of creating its formal movement, its ironic paradoxes and its most profound meanings.'¹¹²

Sterne made the major change by showing not only what Tristram saw or experienced but also things Tristram could not have experienced firsthand. An absolute majority of the subject matter in *Tristram Shandy* are events that the main hero and narrator could not have witnessed. Usually, they are described in a self-evident manner that causes the reader to not even consider questioning whether Tristram could or could not have been acquainted with these facts. Mixing these stories from his family's history together with events from his own life, his opinions, knowledge or inserted contents of different documents and utterances such as sermons that he incorporates into his narrative, seems to support the notion of a mind as a melting pot of stimuli.

The stimuli come to the mind through senses and are further processed into memory where they are liberated from their chronological ties and positions on the scale of significance. Thus it is possible to re-categorise them into newly originating sense structures that Tristram develops in his associative narrative. Associations function as connectors thanks to which Tristram's mind can skip through its content and thus may produce new wholes without being tied by contexts and mutual relations of single ideas which form the new wholes.

The new contexts among which the single piece of information occurs are often productive of the comic effect. The comic incongruence is usually reached by

¹¹² Moglen 28.

incongruence in the subject matter, be it of specific vs. general nature or low mode vs. high mode nature. However, it seems unproductive to try to research the comic incongruence in terms of its actual subject matter, since as it is apparent even on the example of *Tristram Shandy*, it can be practically anything.

The more important aspect of the comic effect in associations is the fact that the associational thinking produces the incongruence in the way described above. Sterne must have been aware of the comic potential of Locke's thoughts on human perception and intellection, therefore, he was capable of creating the associational madness of *Tristram Shandy*. Most probably, only thanks to Locke was he able to transform what he knew as classical and conventional narration into the Shandean stream of mind and thus to realize his creative intention¹¹³.

3. 2. Jean Paul's Notions of Humour and the Ridiculous

The personal inclination to certain associations that create the different chain of thoughts is very much conditioned by the character's nature, which, according to Iser, in the case of this novel externalises itself mainly through the hobby-horses¹¹⁴. In Iser's opinion, Hobby-horses represent subjectivities of the selves in this novel; the characters – mainly Walter and Toby – are defined almost entirely by their hobby-horses. All their modes of thinking and associations are ruled by their hobby-horse. Iser clearly states that the hobby-horse represents the only delineation of the self in this novel¹¹⁵. In Iser's notion, the hobby-horse seems to refer directly to the elder definition of humour as a nature of a person.

However, such interpretation seems rather too simplistic and schematising. As it was stated in the introduction, the narrator wants to communicate the state of being in

¹¹³ See examples of Tristram's creative intention listed in chapter 2.2.1.

¹¹⁴ Iser 109.

¹¹⁵ Iser 111.

the midst of things. This intention presupposes the awareness that everything is permanently liable to change. Thus, there seems to be no sense in the effort to tell one's story from the beginning to the end, since these categories – beginning and end – are not as clear as they might appear to be. The same goes for the effort to depict oneself in one's complexity by describing one's character (by its externalisation – the hobby-horse). The character is permanently liable to change as well, thus no such metaphor as a hobby-horse can serve as its representation. This notion could be illustrated by the fact that Tristram probably acquired character even before his birth, that is, before the conventional beginning. Even as an animal particle (a sperm) he was already destined by a mixture of animal spirits (or juices). This fact seems to point at the relationship between the character and the physical body¹¹⁶. However, neither this relationship should probably be understood as a direct representation, since in case of characters in *Tristram Shandy*, another aspect, the hobby-horse, enters the process of their constitution. Thus, it is more likely that the character in *Tristram Shandy* denotes a dynamic relationship between the physical body and the hobby-horse.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, Iser does not seem to view the concept of character in such a complex manner; he derives the hobby-horse simply from one's nature, which is likely to be the same line of interpretation of the subjective self in *Tristram Shandy* that was started by Jean Paul.

Humour in Jean Paul's understanding, together with his concept of the ridiculous, seems to anticipate the comic theories of Bergson and Freud in many respects. It is also known that he admired *Tristram Shandy*¹¹⁸. Some of his assumptions in this field seem as if they were directly derived from this novel.

According to Jean Paul, humour is closely connected to subjectivity. Humour seems to originate when one subjectivity is let into another. He illustrates this assumption

¹¹⁶ The same influence on Tristram's character is ascribed to his accidentally squeezed nose.

¹¹⁷ Martin Procházka, 'Individualizace, senzibilita a umění románu v Tristramu Shandym' (Unpublished study) 5.

¹¹⁸ He names this novel on several places of *School for Aesthetics*.

on the example of Sancho Panza who thought he was standing in front of an abyss, however, the reader knew it was only a ditch. We would have to consider him completely mad, not humorous, if he jumped into what he believed to be an abyss. We laugh because we insert our insight and perspective into his effort¹¹⁹.

Iser notes that because of the fact that the behaviour of Walter and Toby is always the same – it is controlled by their hobby-horse¹²⁰ – and thus expectable, it still has the comic effect. The comic effect, according to Jean Paul, is caused by the fact that we enter the subjectivity of the comic subject. This principle seems to be remarkably similar to Freud's notion of the *pure comic*. By reception of pure comic we experience pleasure because, due to our image of our self in the situation of the comic subject, we can imagine the energy we would have wasted on it. Pleasure is caused by the fact that we did not waste the energy. Both this notion and that of Jean Paul seem to bear traces of superiority.

However, Jean Paul does not view laughter (or *inner laughter*, which is the internal experience preceding the outer laughter; it is comparable to the concept of the *comic feeling*) as primarily caused by the recipient's self-evaluation as superior to the comic subject. It seems to be on the contrary, for Jean Paul, laughter appears to be a symptom of sympathy with the comic subject¹²¹.

According to Jean Paul, the subjectivity that the recipient enters must be externalised. He clearly states that 'the ridiculous must manifest itself in some effort or action'¹²². Otherwise, the ridiculous is not recognizable. This assertion seems to manifest the difference between Jean Paul's notion of the ridiculous and humour. Whereas humour does not have to be externalised, the ridiculous does. Nevertheless, the basic

¹¹⁹ Jean Paul, *Horn of Oberon: Jean Paul Richter's School For Aesthetics* (University of Connecticut, 1973) 77.

¹²⁰ It is important to note that the hobby-horse does not only serve as one's determination that may prevent one from a more effective mode of thinking. In case of Toby, the hobby-horse is not only a mania that excludes him from the world but also his means of communication with the world*. (*Procházka 6.)

¹²¹ Paul 85.

¹²² Paul 77.

concept of entering a different subjectivity remains. Besides Toby and Walter whose hobby-horse subjectivities are clear and even externalised, most often we enter the subjectivity of Tristram. Iser notes that his mind or self is similarly preoccupied by his own hobby-horse, which is the eccentric narration. Just like Walter and Toby, Tristram is unable or unwilling to abandon his hobby-horse and is thus trapped in its pleasure-bringing execution. The comic effect of the narration or structure arrives on the same principle as with uncle Toby and his obsession with fortification, despite the fact that we expect Tristram's behaviour. The obstinate persistence on one mode of thinking also resembles Bergson's main thesis of the comic deceit found in living entities that behave mechanically.

Jean Paul seems to consider laughter almost as a punishment for our lack of understanding for the character, since if we had enough knowledge of his/her motivation, we would not impose on him/her our insight contradictory to his actions. Thus, according to Paul, the comic (the same as its counterpart the sublime) never resides in the subject but in the recipient. The comic subject, in Jean Paul's opinion, is even excluded from the comic discourse¹²³. The comic (the ridiculous or humour) cannot be caused and perceived by the same person at once. 'No man's actions can appear ridiculous to himself, except an hour later, when he has already become a second self and can attribute the insights of the second to the first.' This is the reason why Walter and Toby never realize that they are comic. Their second self of an hour later always remains inside their mania as they never cease to ride their hobby-horse¹²⁴.

The same principle seems to hold for Tristram the narrator, since he also remains within his narrative mania throughout the text and does not reflect the possibility of his acting in a comic way. None of the features of the text's self-reflection described above (the four discursive motions or the intentional digressive strategy) seem to refer to a

¹²³ Of course, except for the comic that is performed by the subject on purpose. However, Jean Paul does not mention this possibility in his explanations of the ridiculous and humour.

¹²⁴ Iser 110.

specific possibility of the comic effect. The narrator gives away his intention to amuse by the text many times; however, this information represents rather a condition or occasion for the comic¹²⁵ to occur rather than its constitutional part.

Another conclusion that might be derived from Jean Paul's notion of humour is that the second self or another self that projects itself into the comic subject must be familiar with the norm. Similarly to the case of Sancho standing on the edge of a supposed abyss. The recipient interprets it as comic because Sancho's behaviour deviates from what the reader considers normal. Tristram's narrative technique must also be contrasted with a norm. Of course, this norm derives from the narrative conventions of the eighteenth century novel. It could be argued that the notion of the norm changes according to its epoch and culture that might not refer to the epoch and culture of the recipient. Thus the nature of the comic that originates through the deviation from the norm is interchangeable due to the recipient's experience and knowledge. However, in case of the comic, the presuppositions of the recipient play a major role and probably cannot be classified even on so broad a basis as epoch or culture.

Jean Paul mentions *Tristram Shandy* in his *School for Aesthetics* several times. Although none of his conclusions are derived from this novel directly, it is more than obvious that he valued this novel precisely for its comic qualities.

If "tasteful" people like the less inspired *Journey of Yorick*, they fancy they "taste" Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Hence the miserable definitions of humour as manner or peculiarity, the secret coldness towards true comic creations.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ - according to Freud's concept of conditions that enhance the comic one of which is precisely its expectation.

¹²⁶ Paul 105.

In this quotation, we can see Jean Paul's preference towards the newer meaning of the term humour. For the elder meaning of peculiar manner that derives from one's own nature, he uses the term *whimsy*. It seems that reading of *Tristram Shandy* could have helped Jean Paul realize that a peculiar manner, whimsy or humour in its former sense does not suffice to create the comic, or rather, that it does not denote the comic itself. For understanding or describing the comic, one has to relate to the concept of subjectivity. According to Iser, Sterne was the first one to create a subjective narrator¹²⁷. However, it is more likely that it was instead the first narrator who did not attempt to hide or deny the limitations caused by his subjectivity.

Such limitations are derived from unavoidable features of an individual; that means, one has certain measure of knowledge, one's mental processes operate on a platform of certain mechanisms that cannot be controlled by will and, of course, other aspects such as one's character, memory and even intention (for instance to lie) play a role as well. The term 'subjective limitations' is understood as a sum of influences that interfere and in fact prevent the omniscient narration.

The narrator of *Tristram Shandy* does not attempt to deny or hide this condition of his; on the contrary, he reflects on it and works with it on purpose. However, the concept of subjectivity or subjective self is one of the main philosophical problems (similarly to, for instance, the question of the natural world). The term subjectivity or subjective self is used in this work to denote the representation of this concept in literature.

Just as Bergson, Jean Paul was also certain of the fact that the comic may not originate outside the human sphere. It seems, that Jean Paul found a more general definition. However, he did not utter it anywhere in the text clearly. In a similar way as with the necessity of a human element in the comic, but even more generally, it should be concluded that the comic, in Jean Paul's opinion, cannot originate without subjectivity.

¹²⁷ Iser 56.

What is more, the subjectivity must be present on both sides – that of the recipient as well as that of the subject. Thus if the comic subject does not have the qualities of a subjective self, it might be, for instance, an institution or a machine, it seems that by giving it our subjective insight, we also lend, or at least project, our subjectivity, or, in general, a notion of subjectivity into the comic subject. The peculiarities of its ways must be viewed as that of an entity with a subjective self prone to whimsy. The comic can never occur if the comic subject and the recipient remain within the objective discourse. The comic as understood by Jean Paul, presupposes subjectivity. However, if one accepts the more complex reading of the character as a representation of a dynamic relation among different aspects of one's individuality, Jean Paul's and consequently also Iser's notion of the role of subjectivity in Sterne's humour appears to ask for a comprehensive revision.

4. Conclusion

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman is characterised by its unconventional narrative strategies. It is also greatly valued for its comic. In previous chapters it was shown that the most significant and unique mode of the comic in this novel is the one that emanates from its structural idiosyncrasies. The nature of the concept of the comic is derived from the theories of the comic of Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud.

The platform for the origin of the structural comic is provided mainly by disobeying the eighteenth century narrative conventions. Sterne works with the conventions consciously, either by loosening them or breaking them completely. He also reflects their illogical or even paradoxical nature. This strategy offers the narrator a new space, in which the unique comic of this novel originates.

The main reason why Sterne was able to create this space seems to be the fact that in *Tristram Shandy* the aspects that are usually construed as static and unchanging throughout the novel gained dynamic nature. This dynamism is enhanced by a play-like nature of the process of narration and is externalised by the narrative line which is constantly disrupted by interruptions, equivocations and digressions; it is externalised also through the narrator. The narrator operates paradoxically both as a subjective self (with limited knowledge, inclination to a certain mode of thinking connected to a hobby-horse¹²⁸) and as a sovereign of the text whose insight is close to omniscience, what is more, Tristram is also one of the characters of the novel. Thus, additional dynamism is utilised: namely, whether Tristram is or is not part of the fictional world.

The complex and non-static nature of the relationship among the narrator, the world of the characters and the reader seems to create a system of four motions. The four motions of the text represent the directions towards which the text moves by use of

¹²⁸ Although the connection should not be made directly as it was suggested in chapter 3.2.

different narrative strategies. The target of two of the directions (forwards and backwards) is located within the text, however the third movement is directed outside the text – towards the reader – as well as the fourth which directs the opposite way – to, or into the author. The text seems to be an outcome of these motions' constant switching into each other; it brings about the ethos of play and teasing, and consequently also the comic effect.

The usually static quality of each novel, the narrative gap, seems to be carried by these motions and thus also gains dynamism. This quality also provides space for the comic to occur. Thanks to the dynamic nature of usually static aspects of narration, the reader gets entangled in the narration. It does not let him escape by constant raising of his/her curiousness and consequent frustration. The fact that the reader continues reading even under this condition that resembles an addiction to a destructive substance seems to create a meta-source of the comic. It is the comic that is done by the reader and that takes place exclusively in him/her.

The concept of a play is present in the text also in its theatrical meaning. The whole fictional world seems to be placed in the narrator's mind; the rendition of the events resembles staging rather than narration in many respects. Such implied undermining of the fictional reality also helps the occurrence of the comic. The narrative gap is thus due to all of these discursive motions dynamic as well. Through its conduct, it fulfils Freud's principle of the comic oscillation and also all three Bergson's principles of the situational comic.

Besides the quality of dynamism that is given to usually static aspects of the novel, the principles of the comic are also fulfilled by unfolding of the narrative or *sujet* as described by Viktor Shklovsky in his *Theory of Prose*. Based on his formal analysis of the way in which new matter is introduced and interwoven into the narrative, it was shown in

which respects the narrative (predominantly digressive) strategy fulfils many of the comic principles.

One of the most unique features of *Tristram Shandy* is the narrator's awareness and play with the conventions of depicting the fictional time; for instance, in his treatment of two simultaneous actions or of one action interrupted by another. The self-realization of the narration as a process conditioned by its conventions also provides a platform for the comic. The narrator often stops one action and lets his characters freeze in a certain position of the body. The comic that originates from innovative treatment and awareness of the conventional nature of fictional time also produces a discourse of the bodily comic. The comic effects of the human body derive from Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque collective carnival body in some respects and they also fulfil the comic principles of both Bergson and Freud.

The last chapter shows the connection of John Locke's theory of associations and the narrative technique of *Tristram Shandy*. It discusses the role of associations as a means of the comic characterisation and the way in which Tristram's associations that freely rise from his memory bring about the comic effects. The second part of the last chapter explains the influence *Tristram Shandy* may have had on the thoughts of Jean Paul, mainly on his opinions on the role of subjectivity in humour and the ridiculous. This novel contributed to the notion of the comic in general, since some of Jean Paul's conclusions appear to anticipate the theories of Bergson and Freud and they also directly influenced Wolfgang Iser's interpretation of humour.

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Key Words

Laurence Sterne, Tristram Shandy, theory of the comic, humour, British literature, British 18th century novel, Anglo-Irish literature, humorous novel.

Abstract

This thesis discusses the comic discourse in Laurence Sterne's novel *The life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. It shows the way in which the theories of the comic of Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud are applied in this novel. In *Tristram Shandy*, the principles of the comic of Bergson and Freud do not function in their usual manner; they are fulfilled by the structure and the process of narration. The comic in this novel is also enhanced by the fact that aspects of narration that are usually static and unchanging throughout a novel (such as the nature of the narrator) gained dynamism in *Tristram Shandy*. This dynamism offers a space for the structural comic to origin. The comic of *Tristram Shandy* also draws from the principle of association. This novel inspired later theories of humour and the comic in general.

Klíčová slova

Laurence Sterne, Tristram Shandy, teorie komiky, humor, britská literatura, britský román osmnáctého století, anglo-irská literatura, humoristický román.

Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá komickým diskursem v románu *Život a názory blahodárného pana, Tristrama Shandyho*. Ukazuje, jak jsou v tomto románu naplňovány teorie komiky Henriho Bergsona a Sigmunda Freuda. Tyto principy jsou v tomto románu naplňovány přímo strukturou textu, samotným procesem vyprávění. Komika je v *Tristramu Shandym* také podpořena tím, že obvykle statické a neměnné aspekty vyprávění (například povaha vypravěčského hlasu) nabývají v tomto románu dynamičnosti. Toto rozkolísání obvykle pevně daných složek či vlastností vyprávění vytváří nový prostor pro vznik komiky. Komika v tomto románu je také inspirována teorií asociace, a naopak, inspirovala pozdější teorie komična a humoru.